Diagnosis

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12707139.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	F/F, F/M, M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle, James Potter/Lily Evans Potter, Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley
Characters:	Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore, Bellatrix Black Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Luna Lovegood, Emmeline Vance, Lavender Brown, Padma Patil, Draco Malfoy, Astoria Greengrass
Additional Tags:	St Mungo's Hospital, Doctors & Physicians, Alternate Universe - Medical, Healer Harry Potter, Healer Hermione Granger, Healer Ron Weasley, Healer Everyone, attempts at humor, Anal Sex, Vaginal Sex, Inferiority Complexes abound, I'm Sorry, i'm projecting, i'm also bad at tagging, Inspired by Grey's Anatomy, Unreliable Narrator, Eventual Happy Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Diagnosis: A Medical Dramedy
Stats:	Published: 2017-11-13 Completed: 2018-09-27 Words: 282,456 Chapters: 31/31

Diagnosis

by MaidenMotherCrone (orphan_account)

Summary

Harry Potter is screwed.

With a penchant for Firewhiskey and late-night parties, he had no idea that he would find a handsome man in his bed the next morning, when he wakes up; already late for his first day at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies as a Healer trainee. He also had no idea that his mom's ex-boyfriend would have an axe to grind, the most eager girl would follow him around like she'd been hit with a Permanent Sticking Charm, or that the handsome man in his bed that morning was his boss, Tom Marvolo Riddle, Head of Spell Damage.

Like I said, Harry Potter is screwed.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

- Translation into Русский available: Диагноз by Miss_Ghost
- Translation into Українська available: Діагноз by SonnetSeeker

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry Potter was screwed.

The pounding behind his eyes intensified before he opened his eyes to the searing light of day. A powerful wave of nausea washed over him and he swallowed the bile rising from his belly. He groaned in contempt as his head rebelled, a steady pounding that never relented. He *knew* he shouldn't have gone to the Leaky Cauldron.

It had been a celebratory little thing for himself, really. Harry had just wanted a bottle of Firewhiskey and then he would have gone home to get ready for his big day.

But, then, that gorgeous hair and flawless jawline had to *ruin* it.

The green-eyed man sat up, swiftly, the world spinning and he whined in the back of his throat, reaching blindly for his glasses. He shoved them onto his face and looked at the floor.

He whimpered, torn between arousal and confusion, as his gaze trailed up long legs, powerful thighs, a tapered waist that widened to a pair of delicious shoulders. The *man* was still there, with only a blanket covering that delectable arse. Harry tugged his own blanket tighter around his body as his cock twitched. He wondered how he could still get it up when he was feeling so fucking awful.

Harry's head fell back against the dusty loveseat.

Harry hated one-night stands.

"This is so not my thing," Harry whispered to himself.

"Obviously, it was your 'thing' last night."

The older man rolled onto his back, uncaring for his modesty as he stretched his legs and his arms over his head, showing off his well-muscled abdomen. Harry shifted as a sharp ache raced up his spine. That man wasn't little, and suddenly, Harry's body wanted to remind him of that. He squeaked in pain.

"Oh Merlin...this is so humiliating," Harry whispered to himself, mortification coloring his cheeks red.

The man stood up, stretching all of those tight muscles that Harry remembered, suddenly, bunching and tightening as he thrust into him over and over again, after bending him over the armchair. Harry shook his head and he slowly stood up, suddenly glad that he was all alone in the huge townhouse. If Sirius or Remus had been there, they would've never let him live it down.

“You have to leave. Grab your robes and get out,” Harry said, firmly.

“I thought that perhaps we could participate in a little...morning coitus,” the handsome man said, a smirking adorning his face. Harry swallowed hard.

That smirk was what had drawn Harry to the man in the first place. That and the Firewhiskey he had bought him. That smirk and the dark hair that curled at his name and his large hands. Largest hands that had left marks on Harry’s hips, marks that Harry was trying to forget existed. Merlin, the man was so tempting.

“*Tempus,*” Harry said, instead, waving his wand. He winced when he saw the time and jumped up, shaking his head. “Yeah...you using the word ‘coitus’ and all is kinda sexy but, nope. I’m late for work. On the first day. Not good.”

Tom snorted, looking around the house, curiously. “Are we still in London?”

“Um...yes,” Harry said, looking around the room, awkwardly. “It’s...a wizarding home.”

“I can see that. Quite old. Definitely a pureblood home. Is this your home? Wait...are we in your *parents’* home?” the man asked, delight on his face as he walked around the room, searching for portraits of ancestors or perhaps a tapestry. Harry pressed his hand over his eyes, groaning.

The man was naked and utterly shameless.

“No, we’re in my godfather’s house. It’s the...no. We’re not gonna do this. The awkward talking thing that makes it all more uncomfortable,” Harry curled his shoulders down tighter. “Now, I’m taking a shower and you’ll be out of my house by then. Right…so, goodbye...um...”

Harry flushed darker. He had forgotten the man’s *name.*

“Thought you’d remember my name, with how loud you were screaming it last night,” the man quipped with narrowed eyes.

Harry glared, pointing his wand at the man. “Okay. Sorry about that. I’m a bit of a right mess. Now, if you’re not out by the time I’m out of the shower, I call the Aurors. My dad’s an Auror, so that won’t be pleasant. For either of us. But, I’ll do it.”

Harry turned on his heel and ran towards the door, his blanket streaming behind him. He stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder. The man remained, his hands on his hips, still naked and smirking. Harry flushed darker and jabbed his wand at the man, threateningly, before he turned around and stomped down the hall and turned into the bathroom.

He let his blanket pool around his feet and he sighed as he listened for movement on the other side of the door. Harry could hear movement, and he only went to the shower when he heard the front door slam shut. Harry lifted his wand again.

“*Tempus,*” he said again.

It was already nine-thirty.

Merlin, he was so late. He was screwed.

DIAGNOSIS

“Each of you comes today hopeful, wanting in on the game. A month ago you were in school —whether Hogwarts or Beauxbatons or Durmstrang or even Ilvermorny—being taught to be witches and wizards. Today is the start of your training to be Healers. The years you spend here as a Healer trainee will be the best and worst of your life. You will be pushed to the breaking point. Look around you. Say hello to your competition.”

Harry looked around at the others, his eyes narrowed behind his round frames as he took them in. Some were more distinct looking than the others. One woman, in particular, looked particularly eager, her frizzy bush somewhat tamed back into a ponytail, lips peeled over teeth just a little too big for her mouth. Harry looked back to the Chief Healer.

“Eight of you will switch to an easier specialty—whether that means joining the bureaucracy at the Ministry or venturing into business practices. Five of you will crack under the pressure. Two of you will be asked to leave. This is your starting line. This is your arena. How well you play, that’s up to you,” Chief Healer Albus Dumbledore said with a grin on his wizened face. He ran his fingers through his overlong beard, tucked into the belt of his lime green robes. “Now, we shall part under a few choice words: Nitwit! Blubber! Odment! Tweak!”

Harry snorted even as the other Healer trainees laughed, awkwardly. The room was rampant with nerves, already smelling of stale sweat and hormones.

“Is he mad?” one man muttered. He was taller than all the rest, all long gangling limbs and freckles. He ran his hand through a thicket of red hair.

“Mad? He’s a genius. Greatest Healer this world’s ever seen,” Harry said, watching as the man puttered from the room, plucking a lemon drop from his pocket, as he watched them with twinkling blue eyes. “But, yeah, he’s stark-raving mad.”

The redheaded man looked surprised that Harry had responded and he grinned as the rest of the room spun into action, searching through their lockers for the hunter green robes that marked them as trainees, chattering and shouting over one another. The man extended his hand.

“Ronald Weasley. Just graduated from Hogwarts. Gryffindor,” he said with a grin.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. He smirked, taking Ron’s hand and pumping it up and down. “Same. Harry. I can see why we haven’t met. We ran in different circles. I was a Slytherin.”

“O-oh,” Ron stuttered. His brow furrowed but he didn’t snatch his hand away like Harry thought he would’ve. Ron grinned, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. “Sorry. I...my sister’s told me to get my head out of my arse, you know. House loyalties don’t mean much out of Hogwarts anymore. You don’t seem like a Slytherin.”

“I’m not one really. The Hat thought I’d do well in Gryffindor or Slytherin. Wanted to put me in Gryffindor. Picked Slytherin to piss off dear Mum and Dad,” Harry laughed as they walked over to their own lockers, pulling out of their robes. Harry stripped, ignoring Ron’s stares at the hickeys that lined his collarbone. Quickly, he pulled his robes over his bare skin.

“That’s a very Gryffindor thing to do,” Ron said, appreciatively.

Harry threw back his head and laughed.

They continued to change, very little talk happening, but already an easy sense of camaraderie was settling. Harry even hoped that they’d be assigned to the same Healer.

“Turpin, Entwhistle, Cornfoot, Hopkins.”

“Smith, Abbott, Patil, and Runcorn, you’re with me.”

Harry looked up, wondering when his Healer would enter the room.

“I’m with the Hellcat. What about you?” Harry asked, curiously.

"I am too!" a voice chirped obnoxiously before Ron could respond. Harry glanced at the eager young woman from before, his eyes wide as he considered her.

“Um...hello,” Harry said, startled. He glanced at Ron from the corner of his eye but, the man already looked put off-kilter by the eager young woman as well.

"I'm Hermione Granger. I went to Hogwarts too. Ravenclaw, actually. Definitely not same circles but, I think I recognize you from NEWT classes. Can you believe that there are only four women in the program? How insane, right? Anyway, I'm with the Hellcat too," she babbled, excitedly, her lips curled into a smug little smile. Harry raised a single eyebrow and nodded at her.

“Cool,” he drawled, stopping himself from rolling his eyes.

“And you are?”Granger said, turning to look at Ron with less enthusiasm.

“Ron Weasley,” Ron said, staring at her with utter bewilderment. Harry hid his grin behind a hand as he looked through his bag for his parchment and quills.

“Pleasure,” Granger said, dismissively. “We better be off. I hear the Hellcat doesn’t like being kept waiting.”

Harry was barely paying Granger any mind as he cursed to himself. He had come up with only a small roll of parchment but no quill. He had been in a rush that moment, practically

tripping down the stairs of Number 12 Grimmauld Place before he spun on his heel, Apparating to the defunct department store that stood as a facade for St. Mungo's.

"Problem?" Ron asked.

"Yeah. I was...I was nearly late. Forgot a quill," Harry muttered.

Granger's eyes lit up. "Oh, I have a quill. Right—"

"Here ya go, mate. A spare Spell-Checking quill. From Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. My twin brothers own the joint. It's on Diagon Alley," Ron said, pride flushing his cheeks pink, making his freckles even starker. Harry grinned.

"Thanks, mate. That's brilliant," Harry said, plucking the bright neon blue quill from Ron's offering hand. He tucked it behind his ear, basking in Granger's slight disapproval.

"Why do you think they call her the Hellcat?" Ron asked, curiously.

"Maybe because she's crazy?" Harry snorted, excitement rushing through his blood.

Granger's brow furrowed. "Maybe it's professional jealousy. She's probably brilliant. She *is* brilliant. I've read about her and she's done so much work, straddling both the Spell Damage field and Artifact Accident—"

"You've got a lot to say, don't you?" Ron interrupted.

Granger scowled and Harry let out a sharp bark of laughter before he swallowed the rest. He refused to wither under the woman's gaze.

She reminded him of his mother. He waved jauntily at her as he walked forward.

Harry staggered to a stop when he realized that only one other person remained in the room with them. Slowly, he looked towards the doorway.

The Hellcat was older than he thought she would be.

Healer Minerva McGonagall was a tall, severe woman, that looked far more intimidating than she should in her lime green robes. Her black hair was combed back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She had a long black hat atop her head, cocked to one side, that clashed remarkably with the brightness of her robes. Harry swallowed as the Spell Damage Healer stepped forward, eyes narrowed.

Granger had no such misgivings. She stepped forward, eyes bright.

"Hi, I'm Hermione Granger. I—"

Healer McGonagall crossed her arms over her chest.

"Granger, Weasley, Longbottom, and...Potter," McGonagall stated, rather than asking.

Harry winced at his last name but nodded, ignoring the way Granger's mouth dropped open. He glanced over his shoulder, searching for Longbottom. He watched a rather tall, round-faced blond stagger forward, his cheeks pink.

I have five rules. Memorize them," McGonagall said, crisply. "Rule 1: No need to flatter me. I already hold little regard for you. That, likely, won't change." She waved her wand, Conjuring up four booklets. Harry took the pile from her hands, passing them off to the others, his attention never wavering. "Trauma protocol. Matrons will 'Summon' you. You'll know when your wand emits bright sparks. Level of emergence will be dictated by color. That will be in your book. You answer every 'Summon' at a run. A *run*, that's rule 2."

Already she was walking away, and Harry followed after her, delighted. They emerged back into the entrance hall and reception area, filling with artificial light from the fake magical sun that shone through the fake glass windows. The furniture looked different from when Harry was a kid. No longer was it filled with rickety wooden chairs and outdated Witch Weekly's. Now, everything was slick metals, shining like Galleons and Sickles. It was both beautiful and tacky.

"Your first shift starts now and lasts 48 hours," McGonagall said, not bothering to turn to address them directly. Longbottom already looked flustered. Harry hoped that he lasted. He looked like a pleasant fellow. "You're trainees, the bottom of the healer food chain. You will run diagnostic spells, brew potions, work every second and night until you drop and you won't complain."

She led them, briskly, through the busy hall, nodding at those that murmured her name in deference. She turned down a long twisting hallway and then turned sharply, pushing open a door to show a row of beds, all separated by curtains. They looked far too comfortable to be for patients, in Harry's opinion, and he remembered long nights spent in rooms like these, waiting for his parents.

"On call rooms. Head Healers and Healer-In-Charges will most likely occupy them. My best advice is to sleep when you are able, where you are able. This leads me to rule 3: if I'm sleeping, don't wake me unless your patient is dying. Rule number 4: The dying patient better not be dead when I arrive. Not only would you have killed someone, you would have woken me for no reason. Are we clear?" McGonagall said, turning back to face them.

Longbottom raised a slow, trembling hand, and he wilted under the sharpness of McGonagall's gaze.

"That was only four rules. You said there were five," he muttered, nearly inaudible.

Suddenly, McGonagall's wand erupted with a shower of red sparks and Granger made a soft squeal of excitement as Ron rocked forward, eyes wide.

"Rule number five: when I move, you move," McGonagall said firmly and then she was walking so fast that she was nearly running. Granger began moving first and the three others fell in line, running after the two women.

Harry's grin widened. So, this was what it meant to be a Healer.

They moved down the twisting hallway, back into the reception room and where there had been people milling about before, now there was absolute chaos. A team of Healers and Healer trainees, dressed in lime and hunter green robes all revolved around a floating gurney. The patient was rod straight, kept there by a Full Body-Bind Curse.

“What have I got?” McGonagall asked, sharply.

A Healer with hair chopped just under her ears stepped forward. “Ibdore Eavius. Duel go wrong over something stupid. Silly stuff. This one has a mess of lacerations and was ‘it with a Heart-Fragmenting Curse. We put ‘im under Full-Body Bind to keep ‘im still. Put ‘im and the curse in stasis but, you know, nasty buggers.”

“And his opponent?” McGonagall asked as she began walking, waving her wand and pulling the gurney along with her.

"She was the winner. She's being held in custody. Auror Black is handling it. Will want to swing by and talk to this one too," the Healer said.

Harry blanched at the name but kept himself steady. McGonagall nodded.

"Understood. I'll take it from here. This will be a nasty one," McGonagall muttered before she turned to look at her four trainees, eyes sharp. "Can anyone tell me how to treat a Heart-Fragmenting Curse?"

Harry opened his mouth but Granger’s hand shot up, immediately.

“Once stasis over the patient and the curse is placed, you must isolate the curse from the person’s magical core. Once the countercurse is said, the true healing begins. The hearts must be joined through a careful balance of magic and potions, and the dark magic remaining must be dispelled,” Granger recited firmly.

Harry looked over at Ron. Ron rolled his eyes, his lips pulling into a smirk.

“Very good, Granger,” McGonagall said. “Now, how does one dispel the dark magic?”

“Chocolate,” Harry blurted out, firmly.

“That sounds so implausi—” Granger started.

“Good, Potter. This way. We don’t have much time,” McGonagall said. Granger glared at him and Harry grinned at her. “McKinnon’s stasis charms were never very good.”

Longbottom and Ron followed McGonagall immediately. Granger looked over at Harry, her arms crossed and she huffed softly before beginning to walk.

“Problem, Granger?” Harry called.

“No. It’s just...chocolate. Ridiculous. That doesn’t make any sense,” she muttered, storming away.

“Why, because you haven’t read it in a book?” Harry asked after her, taking long strides to keep up. He was only a few inches taller than her, but she walked fast, her eyes trained on McGonagall’s back. “Yeah, I know your type. Read all the books ahead, didn’t you? Os on *all* your NEWTs. Not just the required ones.”

“Well, I wanted to be prepared. I can lend you my books if you don’t know the—” Granger said.

Harry jerked to a stop, glowering at her.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed on the bushy-haired woman.

The woman’s eyes widened and she shook her head, furiously.

“No, I don’t think you’re stupid at all. I mean you couldn’t be stupid if got into *this* program. And even so, your mother is—” Granger babbled and Harry threw up a hand to silence her. She trailed off, making a soft keening sound that made Harry feel embarrassed for her.

“Rule one: don’t ever mention my mother to me again,” Harry said, firmly, turning on his heel and running down the hall, weaving through the sea of Healers to catch up to Healer McGonagall and the others.

They turned into a room and Healer McGonagall Levitated the man onto a bed and looked around at him, her eyes running over the patient’s still form.

“Now, I will isolate the curse from the patient’s magical core and body. The curse operates in a way that it feeds off, continuously, from the victim’s magical core, and affects the blood. Why is this curse harder to counter compared to others?” McGonagall barked.

Ron's hand shot up first, and McGonagall turned to him with narrowed eyes. Ron opened his mouth and let out a soft squeak, bewilderment all over his face. Harry snorted into his hand.

“Um...it’s...well...it’s because it’s not independently power, isn’t it? The curse can’t be countered by the victim because it’ll be two parts of their own magic warring against one another? And spells affecting the body, leave marks, let alone the blood?” Ron said, his voice getting higher and higher with each word, his body tense with uncertainty.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow. “Are you asking me? Or telling me?”

“T-telling,” Ron stammered.

McGonagall nodded once. “Good. I’ll remind you all to take notes. To isolate the spell, we use a universal spell: *Apomonóno.*”

Harry’s eyes widened as the body jerked, and the patient took a deep breath and released it through his nose, the slightest of black fumes emerging with the tiniest hint of white sparks.

“The nasal reaction will let you know that the spell was successful. Now, after this, one would typically search for the countercurse. This is not my first Heart-Fragmenting Curse. *Ákrorogmón*," McGonagall cast with the swift slash of her wand and the patient jerked again.

Harry watched in interest as some of his pallor returned. Just as the countercurse took hold the door swung open with a crack, causing all four trainees to jump. McGonagall didn't flinch.

“What do we have, Healer McGonagall? Another dunderhead involved in something he shouldn’t be?”

“Absolutely, Healer Snape. A mass of idiots,” McGonagall drawled. “Trainees, this is Healer Severus Snape, Head of Potions and Plant Poisonings. You will, most likely, find yourself on his service from time to time.”

Severus Snape was just like Harry’s dad had described him. Tall, thin, and sallow with a hooked nose, and a terrible disposition. He had none of the bedside manner that Harry expected out of most Healers, and he seemed to have no patience for gree, as he was draped in the blackest of robes. He looked at each and every one of them with narrowed black eyes, hesitating over Harry for just a moment before his eyes narrowed at Longbottom.

“Let’s begin,” Snape drawled.

“Granger, you’re on potions. You’ll be working with Slughorn. Longbottom, patient work-up. Do some digging. See if we have any previous files. Write an owl to his family. Potter, revive the patient and get him some chocolate. He’s your responsibility now,” McGonagall, turning on his heel and walking towards the door. Harry grinned to himself as he looked around at the jealous faces; *he* had gotten the first patient.

“Um...Healer McGonagall? What about me?” Ron called.

McGonagall looked over her shoulder. “You get to work in Artifact Accidents,” she said, a hint of amusement in her eyes. Healer Snape swept out of the room after her, leaving the trainees to stare at each other. Ron groaned.

“Artifact Accidents. I get to stick my fingers in idiots,” he grumbled, storming from the room.

"G-gonna set started on the patient work-up," Longbottom muttered and Granger nodded, heartily, linking her arm through Longbottom's, to his intense surprise.

“File rooms are down by the potions labs. We’ll walk together,” Granger said, carefully not looking at Harry. Harry sighed, a hip cocked to the side and he lifted his wand as he was finally alone with his patient.

“*Rennervate*.”

The man jerked awake, bug-eyed and overly alert. He looked up, his lips curled into a snarl before it dropped into a frown. His blonde fringe fell into his eyes and he shook his head again, tossing his hair to and fro.

“Where is she? Where is that little bitch?” he hissed.

"Mister Eavius, you're at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Illnesses. You were hit with a Heart-Fragmenting Curse but, we're working on reuniting your hearts," Harry said, carefully watching his words as his body thrummed with nerves.

"Buggering fuck, cock-sucking motherfucker...bloody fucking bitch," the man snarled, spitting out foul words that Harry's mother would cuff him around the ear for. Harry stared with wide eyes. "You look like a kid. Get me a proper Healer! I need a proper Healer! I've got some kid that doesn't even have the right type of robes and looks like he might vomit. Healer!"

Harry stared, wide-eyed at Ibdore Eavius.

Bugger. This was not his day.

DIAGNOSIS

Ron trudged over, slamming his tray down, overflowing with roast beef, casserole, black pudding, a hearty helping of mashed potatoes, and rounded out by custard tart and a large bottle of pumpkin juice. He looked at his meal and immediately dug in, even as Longbottom and Granger's lips curled in disgust. He glanced up from his meal.

"What?" he demanded, spraying bits of mashed potatoes all over his own tray. Granger rolled his eyes and primly tucked into her roast chicken and greens, sipping delicately at her glass of water.

"48 hours, Granger. *Forty-eight.* You don't eat now, when's the next time you're going to eat?" Ron demanded.

"I just spent hours trying to get patient history. Do you know how many files are in the basement? It's a maze," Longbottom groaned, eating his own sandwich and Ron pointed at Longbottom with his fork.

"You try dealing with a Hogwarts student that was throwing up slugs because of his backfiring wand," Ron retorted and he smirked when Longbottom grimaced. Granger gave him a look of distaste. "I'm lucky that I still have an appetite."

"There are vending machines all over the building, Ronald," Granger retorted. "If you get hungry, you put in a galleon and ask it for a meal. It really isn't that difficult."

"Is that what those big boxes are? Do they have little house elves inside, cooking?" Ron asked, curiously as he continued to shovel down food, making a small mess around him.

"Of course not!" Granger squawked. She looked like she was gearing up for another rant before she reigned herself in and raised her hand, waving two other Healer trainees over. The slight Indian woman smiled broadly at the trainees while her blonde companion had a nasty

curl to his lips. “Ron, Neville, this is Padma Patil and Zacharias Smith. They’re training under Pomona Sprout.”

"Who's Neville?" Ron asked through a bite of his food.

“*I’m* Neville,” Longbottom snapped before he turned to Padma and Zacharias, a bright look in his eyes. “You’re training under *the* Pomona Sprout? She’s done the greatest work with plants that I’ve ever read about. She’s developing a vaccination for petrification. It’s unheard of.”

“She’s fantastic,” Padma confirmed with a smile.

Zacharias shrugged as he sat down next to Ron, right across from Granger and Padma. Ron frowned at the man as he elbowed him.

"She's alright, I guess. A bit round," Zacharias smirked. Ron snorted but withered under the collective disdain of the others at the table. "But, if you say so...I mean, you have to be kinda smart to be here at St. Mungo's. Especially after Dumbledore and Evans took over."

Granger’s eyes lit up. “Did you know that Harry is inbred?”

“Harry? Harry who?” Padma asked curiously. She munched quietly on her sandwich, her eyes darting between the other trainees.

“Harry Potter. Royally inbred. His father is Head Auror James Potter. Which makes his mother, Lily *Evans*," Granger said, jerking in her seat with excitement. Longbottom, Zacharias, and Padma all made quiet sounds of awe that made Granger nodded up and down like a bobblehead.

“*The* Lily Evans,” Padma breathed.

Ron frowned.

“Who’s Lily Evans?” Ron demanded.

“The Evans method is why we’ve been able to Heal patients more effectively than ever before,” Zacharias snorted. “Where did you go to school?”

Before Ron could respond, Padma interjected, "She's a living legend. A Potions Mistress and Alchemist at the age of nineteen and then she revolutionized the field of Healing by twenty-three. The Evans method combined curse-breaking with potions. One day, she's going to create the panacea—the cure to all illnesses.."

“She’s won the Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo and the Order of Merlin, First Class. Twice,” Granger hissed, excitedly. She leaned back in her chair, a satisfied smile on her face when Ron looked suitably impressed by the exploits of Lily Evans.

“Talk about parental pressure,” Longbottom sighed, almost with pity.

“Merlin, I would kill to have a mother like Lily Evans,” Granger said, under her breath. “I would kill to *be* Lily Evans.”

Ron opened his mouth to retort when he lurched, his big eyes trained on the approaching figure. All conversation about Lily Evans ceased as Harry approached the table, and tucked in with gusto, consuming his treacle tart first. When he finished, he looked up, green eyes blazing behind his frames.

“Ibdore Eavius is a pain in my ass. If I wasn’t planning to save lives, I’d end his with my bare hands,” Harry snarled, angrily. He paused when he realized that everyone was staring at him as if he were some kind of exhibit. His anger drained away and he tilted his head in confusion. “What?”

“Afternoon, idiots,” a voice barked. The trainees snapped to attention, staring up as Healer Snape swept into the dining hall, his eyes narrowed. “I should have known I would find you already slacking. This has been posted but, I thought I should share the good news *personally*.”

Harry winced at the ominous tone that Snape’s voice took as he towered over them.

“As you know, the first solo brewing is reserved for the intern that shows the most promise. As I shall be supervising in the first lab, this choice falls to me. I have selected Neville Longbottom for the brewing of the Midas Touch Syndrome potion. Congratulations,” Snape taunted, grabbing Longbottom by his shoulder and squeezing hard. Longbottom cringed under the force and curled into himself as Snape stormed away, his robes billowing around him.

“D-did he say me?” Longbottom whispered.

“Yes...he did,” Granger said in disbelief. Harry leaned forward, his eyes trained on Longbottom’s face.

“Congratulations, Neville,” Harry sighed. He bit his tongue, holding back the cutting words that he wanted to unleash. Longbottom was always going to be the weak link. No need to destroy him before he went and did that to himself.

They fell into a tense silence, carefully eating their food, their gazes switching between Harry’s face and Longbottom’s. The son of the greatest Healer that St. Mungo’s had ever seen versus the nobody that stuttered and blushed his way through his first day. Harry squirmed under their gazes, his irritation rising until he wanted to do nothing but snap at them.

“What were you saying about your patient, Harry?” Ron asked, breaking the strange tension at the table.

“Oh. Ibdore Eavius. What a pain. He cursed up a storm, wouldn’t allow me to treat his superficial wounds, and then tried to refuse to eat the chocolate. I had to try it first in case it was all an elaborate Legilimens trick that—” Harry fell silent as he felt his pocket heat up and

he whipped out his wand, watching as red sparks showered all over his food, singing and burning the leftovers.

They watched in silence.

“T-that was red. That’s not good,” Granger stammered.

“Bugger,” Harry whispered. He threw himself out of his chair, nearly crashing into the floor before he took off at a run, his wand still showering out red sparks. “Out of my way! Out of my way! Merlin!”

He pushed through crowds of Healers, all waiting to get their lunch from the cafeteria ladies, ducking underneath floating trays and diving towards the stairs. The lift would take too long. He stormed down the stairs two flights and emerged onto the Spell Damage floor. He raced towards Ibdore Eavius’ room and frowned when he saw the crowd of matrons, all dressed in their spring green. They were whispering to each other, eager and excited.

“Excuse me, pardon me, that’s my *patient*,” Harry insisted, pushing through the crowd until he was at the foot of the bed. His jaw unhinged.

Half of Ibdore’s face was black, withered and rotting. His eye looked too big for its socket, bulging out obscenely. The blackness chased down half of his body, rotting and necrotic, smelling of old meat that had been left out too long. Harry’s stomach turned as he looked at the hair that decorated Ibdore’s pillow.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. Not in real life,” one matron whispered.

“What is it?” another murmured.

Harry swallowed hard, lifting the edge of Ibdore's blanket to look at his right foot. Pus swelled from underneath his crack, blackened toenails, the sole of his foot decorated with oozing black lesions. And Harry knew. He knew because, once upon a time, he had thought he was going to be an Auror and his father and godfather used to regale him with tales about the darkest and dangerous curses and missions they'd ever faced. This was a spell that his godfather had very nearly been killed by.

“He’s got the Hela-Wasting Curse,” Harry whispered. “Someone ‘Summon’ Healer McGonagall for me.”

Harry lurched once more before he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to center himself as he realized the gruesome oversight. He turned away, quickly walking from the room, his hands balled into tight fists at his side.

“Harry?” a voice called.

He ignored Granger as he stalked down the hall and turned into the nearest loo, Granger right on his heel. Promptly, Harry turned to the waste bin and let his stomach unravel, bile and treacle tart stinking the loo up. He clutched his stomach and vomited again, his body

trembling violently with the force of his illness. Then, he straightened, wiping the bile with the back of his hand and he looked in the mirror at the shock reflected in Granger's face.

“If you *ever* tell anyone…” Harry trailed off and then he bent forward, spitting bile into the sink and washing it down the drain.

Granger shook her head. “I won’t,” she whispered.

“Good. I’ve got to get back to my patient.”

DIAGNOSIS

“I understand what you’re doing, Severus, but Longbottom nearly didn’t make the cut for this program. He only got an A on his Potions NEWT. He isn’t the trainee you want,” Minerva insisted as Severus swept around the brewing lab, collecting the necessary ingredients and settling out three cauldrons—one pewter, one brass, and one copper.

“If he only got an A on his NEWT, why is he here?” Severus retorted.

Minerva sighed, her arms crossed over her chest. “He got an Exceeding Outstanding on his Herbology NEWT. Albus felt the need to make an exception. Severus, I won’t allow you to torture this boy,” Minerva said, firmly.

Severus paused, turning to look at her with narrowed eyes. “Allow me?”

“Every year, you pick your trainee and your trainee suffers more than anyone else,” Minerva snarled, angrily, refusing to back down.

“Terrorize one and the others fall in line,” Severus snapped. “Isn’t that what you told me when you trained me?”

Minerva hesitated, then, and she grimaced when Severus looked at her, eyes bright with triumph. She sighed, relaxing her folded arms just so and she took a step forward, her lime green robes swirling around her.

“Severus, I understand. But, I can’t allow it. Longbottom is soft,” Minerva said, gently.

“Lily was soft once, too,” Severus reminded her.

Minerva scoffed. “Don’t compare the boy to Lily *Evans.* That’s absurd. Pick anyone else. What about Granger?”

“And insufferable know-it-all.”

“She got all Os on her NEWTs,” Minerva interjected and Severus’ lip curled back into a hateful sneer.

“That makes her even *more* insufferable. She’ll learn better through practical work with patients. Let her fail a few times. Then, we’ll see,” Severus said, pointedly and even Minerva had to nod in agreement with his words.

“And what about Weasley?” Minerva asked.

"There's nothing that stands out about him but his hair and his unfortunate freckles."

Minerva sighed. “You should’ve picked Potter.”

"Like hell, I'm picking Lily's son. He looks just like his father. He's probably just *like* his father. Arrogant, mediocre, a determined rule-breaker, attention-seeking, impertinent, and eager to ride the coattails of his mother,” Severus ranted. Even so, Minerva rolled her eyes as she looked at her former student pace through the lab, ranting and raving under his breath.

“They’ll know who he is because of his last name, Severus. And I have quite the feeling that it isn’t impertinence that lurks under Mr. Potter’s countenance but a healthy stew of inferiority,” Minerva said. Severus paused, staring at her with narrowed eyes but Minerva turned away, shaking her head.

She could try all she liked but, she knew Severus. He was as hard-headed as the day that he had joined the program with Lily. They had been the two that had changed the most and the least. Lily had risen to the occasion, a rare shooting star, while Severus, though brilliant in his own right, allowed his resentment to weigh him down. Minerva hoped that having Harry there, the spitting image of James but for his eyes, would shake the man awake; would make him realize that there was more to be done, more to discover, more to accomplish.

It had only awoken a sleeping dragon instead.

“Is he why Lily left?” Severus demanded.

“Lily left because there were other opportunities. She still strives to further the field rather than simply furthering her career,” Minerva said pointedly. Severus scoffed at her, brushing away the old insult and Minerva sighed, crossing her arms. “And she left because she’s a good mother.”

“Explain. Because when *she* explained, it sounded like nonsense,” Severus prompted as he pulled out the patient file, laying it out next to the knives and ingredients and cauldrons.

"Harry has a lot to live up to. I can't imagine what it would've been like to constantly be in your mother's shadow when she's standing right there, casting it. And Lily will do some good in France. She's creating a new teaching program, and her work would've brought her there anyway," Minerva said.

Severus hummed. “Lily’s always chased impossible dreams.”

“And she’ll achieve them. Now, back to your trainee—” Minerva said, her eyes sly and Severus rolled his eyes, turning on his heel. Minerva stepped forward only for her wand to

tremble in her shoulder holster. She pulled it out and a shower of red sparks emerged from the tip, dying at her feet.

She looked up. Snape's wand was spitting red sparks all over the hem of his robes.

Minerva's eyes narrowed. "It's Ibdore Eavius. Let's go."

DIAGNOSIS

Harry didn't turn away from Ibdore Eavius as the door was thrown open and Healer McGonagall and Healer Snape entered the room. Granger backed into a corner, as watchful a sentry as a dementor. She hadn't left his side since he had thrown up in the loo. A hand reached out and wrenched him around, Snape's face a sickly pale.

"What. Did. You. Do?" Snape hissed, spittling marking Harry's face.

Harry wrenched himself out of his hold. "I didn't do *anything*. This isn't my fault!" he shouted back, flexing his shoulder as it twinged from the force that Snape had exerted.

"So, half of the patient's body spontaneously began to rot away?" Snape demanded.

"Clearly not, it's the Hela-Wasting Curse," Harry retorted.

"Do you think it is *wise* to test me?" Snape hissed, his voice suddenly low as a whisper. Harry didn't back down, glaring up at the tall bat-like man, waiting for him to respond.

"This isn't my fault. This is my *teachers'* fault. You *both* missed the most basic test in the book," Harry spat, and he turned to look at Healer McGonagall. Her hand was pressed against her mouth as she took in the horror that had ravaged this man's body. "Healer McGonagall, no one did a diagnostics spell."

McGonagall flinched and even Snape's face twitched with irritation—at Harry or himself, the trainee wasn't sure.

"This isn't anyone's fault…" Granger tried to say, attempting to smooth it over.

"No, it's all of our faults. Not just mine," Harry said, firmly. He looked at them all, his arms crossed over his chest. "Before we came here, we took Healing classes at Hogwarts. You two are fully-trained Healers. And we took an oath. And we didn't uphold that. This man is suffering because none of us remembered to double check the work."

"And what do you propose we do, *boy*?" Snape hissed. "I...this is…no one survives the Hela-Wasting Curse. Especially not one that was powerful enough to spread so quickly."

"We save a man," Harry said, firmly, slamming his hands on the foot railings, looking the gruesome sight in the face. "That's what we do."

“This is beyond me,” McGonagall said, softly. She looked over at Snape. “Should we call Albus?”

“He’s a genius but, even he couldn’t do this. He’s a Mind Healer. This is blood borne. Magic borne. Dark-borne,” Snape said, and he looked over at McGonagall with a particular look on his face. It wasn’t the same disdain that he looked at Harry with, but one of irritation, disgust, and grudging respect.

“H-Healer McGonagall?” Granger asked.

“Tom, then. We’ll need to ‘Summon’ the Head of Spell Damage. Severus, ‘Summon’ Healer Riddle,” McGonagall said, sharply. Snape nodded once and he pulled his wand just as there was a rap on the doorframe.

Everyone looked up and Harry felt his entire life end, right then and there.

The tall, handsome man looked even better in Healer robes. His robes were emerald green, the color of House Slytherin, and his hair was neatly coiffed compared to the sex hair he’d been sporting when he left. He took a step forward, his burgundy eyes flashing as he regarded the Healers. His eyes finally fell on Harry, and his eyes lit up with amusement and anticipation.

“You ‘Summoned’?” Healer Tom Riddle drawled.

Harry was past screwed.

Harry was fucked.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: It has been brought to my attention that I've been a bit of an asshat and haven't been citing my sources :)

My bad about that. I actually have a list and just haven't really thought about citing it until the end of the entire fic, ya know? Anyway, let's get it popping. Here's a broad citation now and then, I'll go into specifics for each chapter:

Hela Wasting Curse - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/83037489149/hela-wasting-curse-technically-a-curse-and-not-a

Midas Touch Syndrome - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/79709014099/midas-touch-syndrome-believed-to-be-a-variant-of

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry was fucked.

“Trainees, this is Healer Tom Riddle, Head of Spell Damage. Harry, you’ll answer to him now,” McGonagall said, though she didn’t look too pleased about that.

Riddle swept into the room, his eyes barely glazing over Hermione who stared at him with awe. He paused when he looked at Harry, his lips slowly tilting into a smirk.

“Well, hello. You’re the trainee in charge of Mr. Eavius,” Riddle drawled.

“Yes,” Harry said, stiffly. “Harry. Harry Potter.”

Riddle’s nose wrinkled. “Merlin, are you *Lily’s* son?”

“And if I am?” Harry demanded.

“Well, you have my condolences,” Riddle sighed. He turned to look over at the bushy-haired young woman. “And you are?”

"Hermione Granger, sir. I've read your thesis, Healer Riddle. On the intersections of Dark magic and the Healing Arts, and may I say that you are—" Granger babbled.

Riddle lifted his chin. “A genius?”

“Please, Healer Riddle, must you encourage hero worship wherever you go?” Snape said, snarkily. Riddle looked over at his colleague, already bored.

“It’s not my fault that I’m included in the Hogwarts curriculum, Severus. I can put in a recommendation with Dippet for you, if you’d like,” Riddle taunted. McGonagall rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Enough with your pissing contest,” she warned. They both sneered at one another before turning to give their full attention to the oldest Healer in the room. “This is a Hela-Wasting Curse. It’s progressed fast. He was only brought in this morning. This is beyond me. You’re the expert in Dark curses, Tom.”

“I am,” Riddle said. He sounded delighted by that. He turned back to Harry, his eyes brightening with an idea. “I’d like to speak with Healer Potter about the patient. He’s been with him all day, and I think he’d have the insight I’m looking for. This way, Healer?”

Harry stiffened under the expectation of his colleague and trainers. None of them seemed to realize that he could *not* be left *alone* with Tom Riddle. Harry had very little self-control and he really didn’t think that he had the strength to *not* want to fuck the man.

So of course, he said, “Of course, Healer.”

He allowed Healer Riddle to escort him from the room and very carefully didn’t jump when he felt a broad hand pressed to the small of his back, guiding him out of the room and down a hallway. Harry jumped when Healer Riddle pushed open the door to a stairwell. Harry yelped and then turned on the man, his facial expression careful not to betray his nerves.

“Healer Riddle,” Harry said, staring pointedly at the spot over the man’s shoulder. It wasn’t easy when Riddle used all of his height and presence to tower over Harry, staring down at him with those pretty, pretty burgundy eyes.

“Healer Riddle? Last night, it was *Tom*,” the man teased.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Well, I barely remember last night, so it’s irrelevant. We should pretend it never happened,” Harry snapped before biting his tongue. This man was his boss. His *boss*.

Riddle’s lips pulled into a wide shit-eating grin, graduating from that casual, devil-may-care smirk.

"So, you remember something happening? Would that be you sleeping with me last night? Or you throwing me out this morning?" Riddle asked and Harry's cheeks grew hotter as he remembered the spectacularly humiliating moment of the morning. "I'm rather fond of both memories."

“No. There will be *no* memories,” Harry warned. “I’m not the boy at the bar. You’re not the guy. This can’t exist. You understand that, right? You are my *boss*.”

Riddle put his hand on his chest as if he were hurt, though Harry could still read that amusement. He shuddered. Merlin, the man was so attractive that it made Harry want to cry. But, Harry also wanted to cry due to the humiliation. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“You took advantage of me and now you want to forget about it,” Riddle sighed, looking away.

“I did not take advantage of you!” Harry squawked.

Riddle snorted. “I was drunk, vulnerable and so good-looking that you just had to have me in your bed. And now, you’ll just throw me away like all the other—”

“Shut up,” Harry whined. “I was the one who was drunk and you are *not* that good looking.”

There was a long pause. Riddle said nothing, staring at Harry with two slowly rising eyebrows and spreading grin. Harry didn’t need to hear the word to know what Riddle was thinking.

Liar.

“Maybe not today,” Riddle allowed. “But, last night? I was the best looking man you’d ever seen. Your words not mind. You took advantage.”

“I didn’t take *advantage*. Now, is there anything you’d like to ask me about the patient. The one currently dying from the Hela-Wasting Curse,” Harry said, pointedly. Riddle looked over his shoulder and shrugged.

“Oh, yeah. No. No questions. I got the gist of it,” Riddle said.

“Y-you got this gist of it? You saw him *maybe* three minutes,” Harry accused and Riddle pursed his lips.

“Duel. Stupid. Hela-Wasting Curse. Stasis. No diagnostics spell. Stupid. I’m going to save the day. Did I summarize that right?” Riddle drawled. He seemed delighted that he had struck Harry speechless and he leaned forward, stepping into Harry’s personal space. “Want to take advantage again? Say Friday night?”

Harry’s lashes fluttered. “Ye…*no*! You’re the Head of Spell Damage. And I’m a trainee.” Harry swallowed hard when Riddle looked down at his lips and then slowly trailed down to look at his entire body. “Stop looking at me like that!”

Riddle looked up at his face. “Like what?”

“Like you…” Harry lowered his voice and hissed, “Like you’ve seen me naked.”

“I have seen you naked. You have a...lovely body, Harry Potter,” Riddle whispered.

Harry clapped his hands against his face and stopped himself from screaming—in arousal or embarrassment, he wasn't sure just yet. Slowly, he looked through his fingers and snarled when he saw that Riddle was grinning.

“Healer Riddle. This is inappropriate. *You* are inappropriate. Has that ever occurred to you?” Harry snapped. He threw his hands down, shaking out his nerves and he looked up, a firm look on his face. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, a fellow trainee is about to perform his first brew for a *very* difficult potion and I’d like to see him screw it all up. Thank you very much.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry looked down into the potions lab, his lips pursed as he watched Longbottom shuffle in, too close on Snape’s heels. Snape turned to look at him, hissing something, probably delightfully spiteful, and Longbottom flushed pink. Ron fell into a seat on one side of him and Granger fell into the other, to Harry’s intense displeasure.

“He looks like a vomiter. He’s going to blow chunks. Bet you a Galleon,” Zacharias Smith said, snidely, to one of their fellow trainees.

Harry snorted into his hand.

“Bet you five Galleons that he blows us all up,” Ron added and he shook his head in displeasure as Snape apparently hissed some instructions at Longbottom.

The entire gallery burst into heckling laughter that was only silenced after Snape glared up at them through the glass, furious warnings in his black eyes. When his eyes fell on Harry, he looked even sourer than he had before, though Harry wasn't quite sure how that was possible. Snape turned back to Neville and snarled something else. Longbottom whipped out his medical potions book and settled it on the stand with trembling fingers.

"Ten Galleons says that he'll pull the whole damn thing off," Granger snapped. Everyone fell silent at her words and Harry raised a single eyebrow. Granger hadn't seemed the type to have a potty mouth. "That's one of us down there. The first of us. Where's your loyalty?"

There was a long moment of silence.

“Twenty Galleons says that he faints!” Harry called, breaking the tension.

There was another burst of laughter that fell quiet again when Neville stepped in front of the three cauldrons and picked up the golden cauldron, setting it on the burner. Neville lit the burner with his wand, and a burst of flames exploded around it. The entire gallery burst into heckling laughter that was silenced by Snape's narrowed eyes and gritted sneer.

“Oh Merlin, here it comes,” Ron whispered, excitedly, elbowing Harry in the side. Harry crossed his arms over his chest, grinning quietly.

“Healer Snape shouldn’t have him doing this anyway...the Midas Touch Syndrome potion is so difficult,” Granger whispered.

Harry smirked. So, Granger's words were for show, then. She had doubts about Longbottom's ability too. Harry would've doubted any trainee. Few knew how to make the Midas Touch Syndrome potion to perfection. It was a tricky disease, and so the cure was just as tricky, if not doubly so.

“Lay the base. That will be half a vial of dragon blood,” Snape said coldly.

Longbottom did as he said, his hand shaking so bad that he nearly tipped the entire vial of green blood in if Snape hadn’t grabbed his wrist tight, steading him but, inevitably, leaving a bruise. Longbottom swallowed and slowly pulled his hand back. He reached for the wide, flat spoon and began to stir, carefully doing three counterclockwise turns.

“So far, so good, Neville,” Granger whispered to herself.

“He’s going to botch this so badly,” Ron said. He pressed his hand to his face. “I can’t look.”

His fingers were still spread out so that he wouldn’t miss a single detail.

“Flobberworm mucus to thicken,” Snape barked.

Longbottom jumped and did as Snape commanded, going to the side and picking up the small bowl of mucus. He scooped it in, nearly missing. Some of the mucus dribble over the side

and Longbottom reached out to scoop it in. He hissed as his fingers brushed against the hot metal and he brought it to his chest. Harry cringed at the amount of secondhand embarrassment.

“Where. Are. Your. Gloves? Imbecile,” Snape snarled, reaching under the table and throwing a pair of dragonscale gloves at Longbottom. Longbottom caught them and Harry wasn’t sure if his face was pink from the fumes or the humiliation.

Harry was no longer smiling, nor was anyone in the room.

“What is he doing?” Granger muttered under her breath. “He’s a teacher. This is hard enough and he’s got us all watching.”

Harry hated to agree with the annoying girl but, he did. Snape was bullying Longbottom, making him feel even more insecure than he was, brewing a high-level potion.

“Come on, Longbottom. You can do this,” Harry found himself whispering under his breath.

Longbottom was still nervous but, when Snape seemed to stop snarling biting comments in his ear, he did alright. He was good when he chopped the dittany and wormwood, measuring them out equally on the scales. He jumped when the potion emitted yellow smoke but, Harry knew that it was supposed to do that. The man was doing alright. Next, another counterclockwise stir. Gold shavings from the patient slowly turning into gold. Dragonfly thoraxes, crushed appropriately. The potion was turning paler, thickening into the paste that it was supposed to be.

Harry almost smile. He hated being wrong but, he was glad for once. Longbottom was doing alright.

And then, he wasn’t.

Longbottom looked around, going back and forth from his potions book to the cauldron, nervously. He traced his wand down, attempting to find one of the thirty steps he was on. Snape looked like he was losing his patience more and more with every passing second.

“The ground unicorn horn, dunderhead,” Snape snarled in his ear and Longbottom jumped violently as he grabbed the bag of chopped bloodroot instead, dumping it into the potion.

Longbottom’s face twisted in horror when he realized what he had done. Snape turned pale as stripped bone, staring at the potion before he grabbed Longbottom by the shoulder and ripped him back, swiftly casting a nonverbal Shield Charm. Ron’s fingers snapped shut and he pressed the heel of his palms into his eyes, blinding himself.

Harry couldn’t look away from the shit show.

The cauldron exploded in a mess of black fire and then curled in on itself as quickly as it had reacted violently. The golden cauldron was shrunken and shriveled, the melting gold slipping over the edge of the scorched counter. Longbottom stared.

“Get. Out,” Snape hissed, softly.

“W-what?” Longbottom whispered.

“*GET OUT!*”

And Longbottom ran. There was a long moment of silence that was suddenly interrupted by Smith whooping with laughter, screaming and giggling with the other trainees.

Ron, Granger, and Harry sat in silence, staring down at the mess.

Ron still hadn’t uncovered his eyes. “Is it over?” he whispered.

“I...Merlin,” Harry murmured.

Granger stood up, looking down at the two. “We need to find Neville.”

“No. Let him lick his wounds for a bit. We’ll go after dinner,” Harry decided.

DIAGNOSIS

Neville Longbottom wasn’t crying, per say, but it was a near thing.

He took his humiliation like an adult, wearing heavy on his shoulders.

“What are they calling me?” Neville sighed.

Harry swallowed the words that he wanted to say. Instead, he looked over at Ron and Granger for help. Granger bit her bottom lip and took one for the team.

“No one’s calling you anything,” Granger lied. She was a terrible liar. Her voice got high and reedy and nervous, and she didn’t make eye contact. Yeah, she was a *terrible* liar.

“Yeah. Not like, the Great Lump or whatever,” Ron said, shiftily.

Neville groaned, falling back on one of the spare beds in the back corner of one of the on-call rooms. He stared up at the ceiling, so pale that Harry could barely remember how pink he had turned when they had first met.

“They’re calling me the ‘Great Lump’? Fantastic,” Neville sighed, shaking his head.

“They weren’t talking about you,” Granger said in a rush. When Neville stared at her with narrowed eyes, she shrugged. “Would I lie to you?”

Neville snorted. “Yes.”

“It’s a rather shitty nickname. Smith came up with it. But, he’s a tosser anyway, Neville. You shouldn’t listen to him,” Harry said as firmly as possible. Neville turned his head to look at

him and Harry stared back, without a hint of a lie in his eyes. “You did as well as expected.”

“You mean, you *expected* me to fail?” Neville demanded.

“I expected any of us to fail,” Harry snapped. “It was a hard potion. And Snape set you up to fail. He was bullying and berating you the entire time. He’s an arsehole and that’s no fault of yours.”

Harry looked over at Ron and Granger but, they both looked at him with a new light. Harry shifted uncomfortably. Granger looked less suspicious and less annoyed with him and that just wouldn’t do.

“Don’t worry, Lump. We’ll whip you into shape,” Harry teased. “Being the Great Lump is a state of mind.”

Neville groaned and Harry winced when Granger didn’t hesitate to punch him in the arm. She had a mean right hook and his bicep twinged with the pain. Ron burst into laughter but, Harry only had eyes for Neville. Neville was smiling.

“You’re all children,” Granger said, stiffly. “Well, I’m going to sleep. We aren’t even twenty-four hours in and I’m exhausted.”

She got up and trudged over to another empty bed. She collapsed on it, face first and curled in on herself. Ron looked over at her, impressed as she immediately went to sleep. He shrugged and turned to Harry.

“It takes me hours to fall asleep, mate. See you on the other side,” Ron said as he made his way to the sofa.

Harry waved weakly. “See you on the other side.”

DIAGNOSIS

"Bugger, my back is in knots," Ron groaned as he stretched over his head again. Harry winced as he heard what seemed like every bone in Ron's body pop and crack. Granger's nose wrinkled in disgust. "And I'm *starving*.”

“I’ve known you for a day and I’m getting the feeling that you’re always starving,” Granger muttered under her breath. Harry’s lips twitched in amusement before he reminded himself that he detested Granger on principle.

“You want to get breakfast after this? Bet we can get a full English one,” Harry said. Ron looked delighted at the prospect and his head bobbed up and down. Harry leaned back against the windowsill, drumming his fingers as he waited.

He wasn't sure what it was about. Probably a mid-first shift check-in. He wondered if they'd see Head Healer Dumbledore. Or maybe Healer McGonagall. Harry would loathe seeing Healer Snape. The idea made his teeth grind. It was too early to already be put in a bad mood.

And then, the door swung open and his bad mood settled in, anyway.

“Hello, trainees. I want to do something rare and exciting for once,” Riddle drawled as he paraded into the room.

Harry looked down at his lap, concentrating hard on nothing. Concentrating hard on anything that wasn’t Riddle’s smirk or his hair or his face or his eyes. He remembered doing something rare and exciting just yesterday morning. Harry swallowed.

"I'm asking runts for assistance. I have a patient named Ibdore Eavius. He was brought in yesterday after a duel gone awry and has suffered from a late onset Hela-Wasting Curse. He isn't responding to the countercurse and any attempts to slow down the wasting process only irritates the spell and slows down the joining of his hearts, created from a Heart-Fragmenting Curse. These curses are sentient and dangerous," Riddle said, looking at each and every one of them.

Harry shivered under his burgundy gaze, and he ignored Granger’s curious look, instead looking around at his competition. Smith and Patil exchanged excited looks, already whispering to each other possible ideas.

“I’m a very busy man, of course, and so, I want you all to do the research. Find out why this curse isn’t responding like the others. You’re tired. Busy. But, I don’t care,” Riddle said, firmly. He stopped pacing and turned to look at all of them, commanding their attention like a grand concertmaster. He was a swell of charisma, and everyone was hanging off his every word. “Whoever finds the answer will be on *my* service. You’ll do something trainees never do: enter the magical theatre and assist on an advanced curse-breaking, corrective procedure.”

Harry sat up straighter, his eyes wide. He glanced over at Ron and the man looked enraptured. He turned to Granger and she was staring right at him, her brown eyes boring into him, urging him to do something that he wasn’t sure of.

“You have less than 8 hours,” Riddle said and then he was walking out of the room, leaving the room of trainees in shock.

Harry watched as the trainees through themselves, reaching for the copies of the patient workup and charts. Harry turned to Ron but, the redhead already looked apologetic.

“Hey...Harry…” Ron drawled, his voice looping up high. He already sounded regretful, looking down at his grumbling stomach.

Harry pursed his lips. “I see.”

“We’re friends and all but...I need to get ahead and do the research if I want to get into Spell Damage. It’s the most competitive concentration. You understand, right?” Ron asked,

pleading and Harry relented almost immediately, nodding and waving his hand.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it,” Harry sighed.

Ron’s smile brightened. “*Also*, if you have any tips about Eavius, since he was your patient —”

“Now, you’re reaching,” Harry warned.

Ron shrugged and darted away, his copy of the patient paperwork clutched to his chest. Harry sighed, leaning against the false window, staring at the door that Riddle had disappeared through. He barely noticed when he felt someone poke him in the shoulder. He looked down at Granger, raising a single eyebrow.

“I want to work with you,” Granger said, immediately.

"Didn't you just hear me? I'm not giving anyone any answers. I'm done with this case," Harry said, firmly, even though his heart ached at the idea of not assisting on a procedure like that. Even his mother had never assisted in a Hela-Wasting Curse case.

It was the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Yeah, I heard you. But, I don’t just want answers. I want to work with you,” Granger said, firmly. For once, she didn’t seem overeager. She seemed serious. “I think you’re really intelligent and I think you care about this case. And I need to be in that procedure.”

“You want to break into Spell Damage too?” Harry asked.

Granger shrugged. “I like all Healing magic but, I won’t say that it isn’t an amazing field. Most discoveries are made in the Spell Damage field. I think we’ll find the answer. If we do, we have a 50-50 chance of getting in on this procedure.”

“I’ll work with you,” Harry decided. “But, I want nothing to do with the procedure. I want nothing to do with Riddle.”

It felt like he was lying through his teeth.

Granger’s mouth dropped open. “Are you serious? It’s the biggest opportunity any of us will get for at least a year. What do you have against Riddle?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“Look. If we find the answer, the procedure is yours. Do you want to work with me or not?”

Granger didn't ask again. She grinned and nodded.

“Deal. Let’s get food first.”

DIAGNOSIS

“So, he has no prior conditions. No dragon pox, no spattergroit. Nothing that might be artifact or creature related. Latent magical deficiency? Are you seriously not going to tell me why you won’t work with Riddle?” Granger asked. She barely looked up from her books as she dug into her breakfast. They were spread out over their table, stacks of books and papers surrounding them.

Harry looked at his breakfast spread. It was later in the day, so everything good had been taken and he was left with too crispy bacon, burnt toast, and soft-boiled eggs. What a treat.

“No,” he said, firmly. He dug into his food, ripping the toast into tiny bits and dipping it into the yolk. The toast tasted like ash on his tongue. Fucking *perfect.* “What about Davenport-Nosoi Syndrome?

Granger finished her bowl of oatmeal and exchanged it for another book. She tapped it with her wand and dragged the tip down as she skimmed the passage. “Plausible but, no. It would explain why he isn’t healing properly but, he would’ve been diagnosed by now. No unfocused eyes, no weak muscles, nothing that resembles Muggle asthma. It’s hard to miss a magical autoimmune disease. Just tell me.”

Harry swallowed the rest of his terrible toast as he searched through another paper. He frowned when he realized the language was familiar and promptly rolled his eyes when he saw the author of the paper.

Fucking Healer *Lily Evans,* Spell Damage and Potions Specialist.

“You can’t comment, make a face, or react in any way,” Harry said. Granger stared at him, blankly. “We had sex.”

Granger’s mouth parted and she took a deep breath through her nose as she searched Harry’s face for a lie. Harry stared back, just as blank.

“Is he a half-blood? Half-bloods can be susceptible to Muggle diseases too, sometimes. Depending on family history,” Granger said, her voice only slightly higher than normal. Harry rolled his eyes before her words registered.

“Wait...really? I had no idea,” Harry said, suddenly interested.

“Really? I mean, it was your...never mind,” Granger trailed off, looking back down at her books.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Okay, I realize now that my rule was unfair. I just found a paper with her name on it. She wrote a quarter of our syllabus at Hogwarts in the Healing class. But, I had no idea she’d do any genealogical work. It’s not her style. A little lowbrow for her. She likes to do highly stylized Healing magic that’ll bring her eternal glory or whatever.”

“Well...it was mostly Snape and Dumbledore but...she’s credited,” Granger said, nervously. She swallowed hard, leaning forward. “And most of your mother’s work has been incredibly important to furthering the field of Healing.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Harry drawled. He waved it off and sighed. Granger didn’t need to know that he used to consume all of his mother’s work when he was an impressionable thirteen-year-old. He didn’t think he could live down the embarrassment of it all. “Okay. There’s something we’re missing.”

“Was he good?” Granger blurted out. “I mean, was it any good? He looks like he’d be good.”

Harry looked up from his work, sharply, and promptly burst into laughter as Hermione’s cheeks pinked up. Hermione looked back down, shaking her head.

“We missed something,” Harry repeated, deciding to spare her. “We missed the diagnostics spell. What else could we have missed? What if we’re out of answers? What if no one comes up with anything?”

"What if she dies, you mean?" Granger said. She bit her lower lip and looked away. "Okay...this is going to sound awful, and I know, it's probably quite callous but...I really wanted to be in that procedure."

Harry snorted, shoving away his mediocre breakfast to look at the young woman. He wanted to keep hating her but...she made it hard. She was a braggy know-it-all but, she grew on a person.

"It just sucks because he's going to be a shitty person forever and be known as the man who lost in a duel in the middle of Diagon Alley, like an arsehole," Harry said, laughing softly. Granger gave a little chuckle herself. "He was a right cock, you know. Wouldn't even eat the damn chocolate. Just so damn difficult. I don't know how the E&T rallied him up. McGonagall said that that girl's stasis charms were great but—"

Harry trailed off, dropping the parchment from his hand and he looked over at Granger. Granger was ramrod straight, staring at him.

“What is it, Harry?” she asked in hushed tones.

“The *stasis* charms. What if...what if because McKinnon forgot the diagnostics charms, she just cast a universal stasis charm. And that...that magic would’ve messed with the way the two dark curses were weaved together?” Harry suggested.

And Granger’s eyes lit up. She was right there with him. “Because of course, magic calls to magic, so of *course,* the Heart-Fragmenting Curse and the Hela-Wasting Curse would interact. And you don’t *need* eye contact before casting the Hela-Wasting Curse. It’s unique in that way. Who says Eavius’ opponent didn’t have the time to cast it before she was subdued by the Aurors?”

Harry jumped up, gathering his books to his chest, his thoughts rushing through his head. He could barely get them out, they were going so fast, and his body thrummed with a kind of thrill that he’d never really felt before. Not even when he’d gone flying with his father for the first time.

“And then we took *off* the stasis charms. Which means, the Hela-Wasting Curse would’ve started to act later than intended. But, it’s internal before it’s external, you know. So that means...his *hearts*. There’s a reason his hearts aren’t binding like they’re supposed to be. There’s a reason his magic and body aren’t responding to countercurses or potions. Magic requires a working body but, more specifically, a working *heart*,” Harry said and Granger was picking up her books as they half-jogged from the cafeteria, babbling to each other in excitement.

Granger looked at him, her eyes far too bright and excited for the damaging conclusion that they had come to.

“His fragmented hearts are *rotting*.”

DIAGNOSIS

Neville let out another groan and Ron looked up at him, finally pushed to the point past irritation. He sighed, slamming his book shut and crossing his arms to stare at the trainee from the across the table.

“Okay, are you just going to sigh the whole time? Because if so, can you go do that while you fill out patient paperwork? You’re distracting me,” Ron whined and Neville looked up at him with wide eyes. His cheeks flushed pink.

“Sorry...I didn’t even realize,” Neville apologized.

Ron shook his head. “No. It’s alright, mate. Come on. You messed up yesterday but, you have a chance to make up for it today. Look for the answer to the Hela case.”

Neville scoffed, shaking his head. He leaned forward to search for something in Ron’s face.

“You think *I’m* going to know anything about the Hela case. I don't even want to be in Spell Damage. I'm not interested," Neville said, his head falling to the table in front of him. Ron leaned towards him, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Really? Everyone wants to be in Spell Damage,” Ron said.

“Not me. I wanted to be in Potions and Plant Poisonings,” Neville whispered. “But, *that’s* over. Snape hates me and Lily Evans is teaching in France. There’s no one that can teach me potions at the caliber that I want to learn.”

“You can learn about plants!” Ron suggested, earnest and excited. “You said you really liked Pomona Sprout, right?”

“I’m at the top of the Herbology field,” Neville said, flatly.

Ron blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I did better than an Outstandings on my Herbology NEWT. It’s why I’m here. I only got an A in Potions but, the Herbology NEWT made up for it, I guess. My gran didn’t think I had what it took, and look...she was right,” Neville moped and he looked up at Ron with a sad look on his face, shaking his head.

“Old people always have too many opinions,” Ron said, firmly. “Don’t listen to her. What did your parents say?”

"They're supportive but, I know they wanted me to be an Auror. They're both Aurors. Well, my mum is a hit wizard and my dad is an Auror," Neville amended. He didn't seem to notice Ron's wide-eyed, jealous stare as he moped, ruminating in his own failures.

“Whoa. My Dad just works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department. When someone fucks up, they get sent here and then the paperwork gets sent to my dad,” Ron said, squirming with envy, and Neville looked up, his eyes narrowed on the other man.

“At least you can brew Skele-Gro. When I took my Potions NEWT...nevermind,” Neville sighed, letting his head fall back down to the table.

Ron rolled his eyes and continued to search for the answer, vibrating with the possibility that *he* might find the answer to the Hela-Wasting Curse. Ron had wanted to be in Spell Damage since he knew what Healing was. It was glamorous and powerful, and only the best would qualify. Spell Damage Healers got all the glory. Lily Evans, case in point.

“What...are you doing?”

Neville froze as he heard the voice that he had dreamed about the night before float above them. Ron snapped his book shut so fast, he closed it on his fingers. He yelped, pulling his hand tight against his chest, wincing from the dull ache. Severus Snape looked down at them, utterly unamused.

“We’re...Healer Riddle said that the trainee who figures out the Hela-Wasting Curse patient can observe the procedure from inside the magical theatre,” Ron squeaked out. He cleared his throat and gruffly, continued, “We thought that we—”

“And why aren’t you brushing up on the antidote to the Midas Touch Syndrome, Longbottom?” Snape barked. He only had eyes for the blond young man who squirmed uncomfortably under his black gaze.

“I...I was…”

"Slacking. Very well. Come with me," Snape said, sharply, with all the loathing his body could muster. Neville jumped up immediately, cursing softly when he banged his knee against the table. Snape rolled his eyes. "We'll be practicing the brew again and again until you can make it perfectly. I will not tolerate nonsense in my lab."

“Have fun, Neville,” Ron said, saluting the man.

“You too, Weasley. You both have an hour to collect your belongings. You will be in the lab promptly.”

Ron groaned. There went his dreams of glory and participating in a procedure on his first day. Snape was a right pain in his arse. “Merlin’s saggy left testicle…”

DIAGNOSIS

They ran down the hallway, ducking around Healers in their lime green robes and the trainees in their hunter green.

“Move! Move! Move!” Harry shouted, shoving people out of the way, ignoring yelps and curses. He looked over at Granger but, she seemed just as singly determined as him. “Where do you think he is?”

“Right in front of us,” Granger barked, and Harry looked forward and saw Riddle himself, waiting for the lift while impatiently tapping his foot.

They skidded to a stop in front of him.

“Harry?” Riddle asked.

“The stasis charms!” Harry blurted out.

Granger nodded in agreement. "McGonagall said that McKinnon isn't good with stasis charms," she said. She seemed to realize that what they were saying still didn't make sense from the utterly unimpressed look on Riddle's face. "But...there was a stasis charm. And you don't have to have direct line of sight for the Hela-Wasting Curse. When McGonagall took off the stasis charm, she took it off the Hela-wasting Curse too, allowing it to do its work. But, she already tried to heal the Heart-Fragmenting Curse."

“Hurry up, Granger. The lift’s almost here and I’ve work to do,” Riddle snapped, irritated.

Granger swallowed. “Okay. So...the countercurse...all the work...doesn’t work if there’s no magic. No blood. No *heart.* The hearts are rotting. That’s why nothing is working. You have to bind his heart but, they’re rotting. So, it’s an *internal* procedure.”

She said it like it was gold, something precious. It was. There were very rarely internal procedures. Riddle seemed to realize what he was being handed too, from the look on his face. He hummed, his nostrils flaring.

“If what you’re saying is true, I’ll need to open his chest, address the rot with a spell, directly bind the hearts with potions and magic and then counter the Hela-Wasting Curse,” Riddle said, softly. “It’s near...impossible.”

“But, it’s plausible,” Harry said.

Riddle looked at him, sharply, his eyes searching him. Then, he nodded to himself. “I think you’re both correct. Harry, I’ll see you in the magical theatre.”

Without another word, he stepped into the opening lift and disappeared out of sight. Harry’s jaw unhinged and he slowly turned to look at Granger. She was staring at the space where Riddle had just been before slowly turning burning eyes onto Harry.

“Granger…” Harry started.

But, Granger was already thundering down the hallway.

Harry waited. On one hand, he was elated but, then, he had also told Granger that he didn’t want it. But, he did. He wanted it so badly that it hurt.

"Fuck me gently with a chainsaw," Harry hissed to himself and then cursed himself for acknowledging his mother's favorite Muggle film. He ran after Granger, running down the hallway and around the corner to their little section of the on-call room that they had commandeered for themselves.

Harry skidded to a stop and looked around. Longbottom and Ron sat on either side of her.

“I...we get you’re mad…but, Snape is expect—” Ron started.

Granger snarled, “I was the one that came to the conclusion. It should’ve been me.”

Harry winced as he lifted his wand and whispered, “*Muffliato*.”

He didn’t need anyone hearing the catastrophe that was about to happen.

His three colleagues looked up. Granger’s nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed.

“Don’t do me any favors. It’s fine,” Granger said, firmly.

Harry squirmed uncomfortably as Granger bit angrily into her granola bar, chewing on it rather obnoxiously. He felt almost...*bad* about it. No, he definitely bad about it all, especially when Hermione did most of the explaining. He just...came to the right conclusions after all of her hard research and theorizing.

“I’ll tell him I don’t want to do it. I’ll tell him to let you have it,” Harry said, his voice weak and Granger looked up at him, her brown eyes blazing with irritation.

"Don't come to me for absolution. You want to be a dragon, be a dragon," Granger said. Longbottom reached to her side, opening his mouth to speak again but, Granger looked up, not done yet. "And yes, you're a dragon. Except, it makes you feel bad."

“I’m not...I don’t…” Harry tried.

“No. Sod off, Harry. I didn’t get picked for the procedure for *sleeping* with my boss, and I didn’t get into this program because of my half-blood status and my *famous* mother,” Granger spat. Harry winced at every word and it took everything in body not to take a step

back from the cutting poison in her words. “Some of us are just *Mudbloods.* Some of us have to earn what we get.”

Harry’s lips curled at her words and he shook his head. He refused to look at Longbottom or Ron. He refused their judgment.

“You know, fuck you, too, Granger. It’s not my fault that I’m more talented than *you*,” Harry hissed though he didn’t mean it. “Book smarts don’t translate in real life. Clearly.”

And he could see in Granger’s eyes that she hadn’t meant it either, that she had regretted it the moment that she had said them, and so did he. But, he was all pride and no courage, just like a Slytherin, as his father used to say before he had straightened him out. Harry swallowed and turned on his heel, storming away, his eyes burning.

He wiped away at his face, swallowing his irritation, as he made his way to Eavius’ room. He paused in the doorway when he heard a familiar voice.

“And why can’t I speak with the suspect?”

“Because he isn’t a suspect, Auror. He’s currently a patient. *My* patient. Who will stay in a magically-induced coma until I say so?” Riddle retorted.

“You enjoy making my job difficult for me, don’t you, Healer?”

“Absolutely.”

Harry swallowed his nerves and pushed through the door. Both Healer and Auror looked up, both looking pleased to see him for two very different reasons. Sirius Black grinned at Harry, pride thrumming through his face.

“Harry!” Sirius said, immediately turning away from Riddle and bounding up to Harry like the big, dopey dog that he spent half of his time as. He wrapped his arms around Harry and squeezed hard, pulling him off his feet. “How’s your first day? Have you seen Snivellus yet? How’s the house? Still dark and dusty and lonely?”

“Please...Sirius...I’m a work,” Harry grunted, squirming away. Sirius released him, rather abruptly, and Harry staggered back into the wall, pinned there by two laser stares.

“Are you on this case? It’s a good case to have on your face, right? Even if you have to work with this arsehole,” Sirius said, glancing over his shoulders with a sneer.

"This arsehole is allowing Healer Potter to participate in an advanced procedure," Riddle drawled. He moved forward, looking at the two of them curiously. "Healer Potter, how do you know Auror Black?"

“He’s my...godfather,” Harry whispered.

And then. The horror.

Wait...are we in your parents’ home?

No, we're in my godfather's house.

Slowly, Riddle's lips pulled into a terrifying smile, full of glee and satisfaction. Sirius' narrowed his eyes at the man, suspiciously.

"What are you grinning about, Riddle?" Sirius barked.

"Nothing, Auror. Nothing at all. I've just been having a very pleasant day. Well, really, it started with the other night but, my good luck has been driving me through the day. I feel like I've drunk a cauldron's worth of Felix Felicis," Riddle said, looking between Sirius and Harry with amusement and he let out a hissing laugh that shouldn't have been as attractive as it was.

Harry was attracted to it anyway.

"Healer Riddle…" Harry warned.

"Tell me, Auror Black, do you have a house in London?" Riddle taunted.

Sirius' eyes narrowed. "What's it to you—"

"Enough," Harry barked. He turned to look at his godfather. "Sirius, please stop antagonizing my boss. Now, come on. I'll explain to you why your suspect can't be woken up yet."

"Be done with that quickly. We've work to do," Riddle called after him.

Quickly, Harry herded Sirius out of the room, shooting a glare over his shoulder at Riddle. Riddle grinned back at him, still thrilled by the notion that he fucked his enemy's godson in his enemy's house. Harry stuck his tongue out at the man and Riddle licked his lips, as if remembering something. Harry flushed and turned back around.

"Head on straight, Harry. You're about to be in the theatre," Harry hissed to himself. Not even in his mother or Snape or even Dumbledore had been in the magical theatre on their first day. "Get it together."

"You said something, Harry?" Sirius asked.

Harry hadn't even been whispering.

Harry sighed. "Never change, Sirius. Never change."

DIAGNOSIS

Harry swallowed as Riddle slowly adjusted his robes, watching through the window as the matron pushed the floating stone slab into the magical theatre. He looked ready, and that wasn't surprising. Riddle did all of this for a living. Harry was *terrified.*

"Why did you pick me?" Harry asked, softly.

Riddle hummed, never looking away from the prone body. "What?" he asked, pressing the tip of his wand to the middle of his plush bottom lip.

"Did you pick me for the procedure because I slept with you?" Harry demanded.

Riddle scoffed, shaking his head. "No. You're Eavius' Healer. You've been with him since he arrived. And on your very first day, you're helping to save his life. Granger is good but, she isn't his Healer. You deserve to see this to end. Don't let the fact that we had sex blind you. You earned this," Riddle said and without another word, he threw open the doors and entered the theatre.

Harry slowly trailed after him, still processing the older man's words. The older man that proclaimed that Harry had *earned* this. Not even Granger thought that he had earned this—his position in the program or the procedure.

Riddle did. Riddle believed that.

Riddle circled the room, looking down at the patient lying on the long floating stone slab. He glanced up at the gallery and smirked. He looked over at Harry. Harry pressed himself tighter against the wall, watching carefully. Riddle waved him forward and slowly, Harry crept over to the side of the patient. Ibdore Eavius looked so still.

Unnaturally so.

“It’s a beautiful day to conquer death,” Riddle announced. He said it like it was ancient rite of passage, a tradition that repeated itself every time he entered the magical theater. “Let’s have some fun.”

Riddle raised his wand and flicked it once, lighting up everything in the room. Harry watched in awe as the man spun, pulling magic from the air, and letting it wash over everything, sterilizing everything the magic touched. The matron looked barely affected, as if this was something she experienced every time Riddle entered a magical theatre. Riddle stood to the side and looked over Eavius’ body at Harry, his eyes bright with excitement.

“We get to crack his chest open,” Riddle said, softly. The longer Harry looked at him, the more he couldn’t stop himself from smiling. The man looked like a little kid on Christmas, his fingers itching to do the work.

“*You* get to crack his chest open,” Harry corrected.

Riddle shook his head. "Take up your wand. Carefully use the Severing Charm across this area," Riddle said, drawing a mark on the man's chest, leaving stripes of sparks to show Harry the path.

"M-me?" Harry whispered. Riddle nodded once. Harry swallowed his giddiness and pressed his wand tip against the skin, digging into the soft flesh. Softly, he said as he dragged his wand down Eavius' chest, "*Diffindo*.”

He watched as blood spilled on either side of the fresh flaps of flesh. The smell of blood hit Harry's nose but, he was never bothered by such a thing. He almost liked it. It reminded him of Knuts and chocolate, oddly enough. Harry looked at the two sides of skin—one flushed and healthy, like normal skin. The other side was sickening and grey, a thick rotting slab of meat. Normal blood oozed from one size while the other flap of skin stunk like age and decay.

"Now, stand back and learn," Riddle instructed.

Harry nodded, wiping the tip of his wand in the towel, washing it clean. He watched as Riddle slowly cast a spell, weaving it through the air and the skin gaped, revealing the blood and muscle and flesh, and finally Eavius' ribcage. Harry leaned forward and gasped when he saw the insides of the man's chest. Where one's heart should be, there were three little balls of muscle, each beating to different rhythms. Two were a healthy scarlet, wheezing and pumping blood. The third was sluggish and grey, open sores oozing black poisoning the man's insides.

"There it is," Riddle breathed. He looked over at Harry. "We'll isolate this heart in particular. It's the only sick one. *Apomonóno.*"

Harry watched as purple sparks erupted, trapping and wrapping and strangling the small little grey rotting chock of muscle. It sluggishly pumped out blackening blood.

"Now, the potion, right?" Harry asked, already reaching for the anti-rotting potion, a base of dittany and freely-given unicorn horn.

"Yes. We pour it right into the open cavity," Riddle said, softly. He looked up at the gallery for just a moment before he glanced back down at Eavius' body. "I would've liked to crack his ribcage open. Just to see what would happen. But, alas, he isn't dead and we've got an audience."

Harry looked over his shoulder and gaped. He shouldn't have been surprised by how many people had crammed into the fifteen-person gallery. Internal procedures were rare. Everyone would use it as a teaching moment.

Riddle poured the potion over and hummed. "Lovely. That'll heal right up. Now, we can actually correct the Heart-Fragmenting Curse. Work smallest to largest in all Spell Damage cases. The smaller problems complicate the largest ones. Never vice versa," Riddle said, and Harry didn't want to admit it but, the man was a good teacher, taking his time to explain the way he proceeded.

"And the Heart-Fragmenting Curse is small?" Harry asked.

Riddle smirked. "Well...this is nothing to what you're about to witness. *Ákrorogmón,*" he cast and Harry watched in awe as the three little muscles burped and bubbled out blood and magic at a pace, he'd never seen. In the little cavity, they drifted together and he watched as there was a bright flash and they were crushed together.

A heart. A *normal*, healthy heart.

“I love magic,” Harry whispered.

“As do I,” Riddle agreed. “Now, Harry, I need you to stand by the wall. Don’t move. Don’t even breathe.”

Harry frowned at him. “Why?”

“Because what I’m about to show you...is why I became a Healer,” Riddle leaned forward across Eavius’ both and murmured the words, a secret between the two of them. “I’m going to show you how to conquer death.”

Harry’s eyes brightened behind his glasses and he nodded, slowly backing away. He watched as Riddle rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. Slowly, the man cracked each knuckle and wiggled his fingers over the prone body. Harry only stopped when his back hit the wall.

And then, it began.

Harry couldn’t think of any one reason why he wanted to be a Healer. But, he could think of a thousand reasons why he should quit. It would be hard, living in his mother’s shadow. There were going to be lives in his hands. But...there was something more to it.

It was more than just a game.

There was no glory in easy. The battle was in Riddle’s words. *A beautiful day to conquer death*. Healing was about telling death to screw itself. There would come a moment when it was more than just a game. He would either take the step forward or turn around and walk away. He could quit, but the thing was, he loved the playing field.

Harry used to play Quidditch as a kid, in a little peewee team. Whenever he flew, whenever he won, he felt higher than ever.

Standing in that theatre, he felt that same high and he would chase that high for the rest of his life. Mere mortals couldn’t do that. Only Healers could. Only he could. And he would remember the blood and the bones and the long, agonizing fight to the top.

But, now he understood his mother. He understood her better than ever had before. This wasn’t about her, chasing her shadow. It was about chasing the high. The rush.

This would be how he became legendary.

“*Festa kroptugr. Lifdagar, lifdagar. Festa kroptugr. Lifdagar, lifdagar.*”

He said it like a nursery rhyme. Like a song, almost. Like a lullaby.

Harry watched in awe as the air in the room also seemed to be sucked out and into the Healer that stood before him, swirling his wand over the body. There was something about watching a man speak life into a person. It was awe-inspiring. It was magnificent. It made Harry ache inside. It was beautiful, to see the streams of red erupt from the end of the man’s wand, red stricken with white, pour into Ibdore Eavius’ body. To watch the magic strip away the sickness, as if the body had never been touched in the first place.

The hair on Harry's arm stood on end. Riddle never looked away from his work, so single-mindedly focused.

Harry couldn't look away either.

And then, it was over, Riddle's spell-song tapering off.

There was only a wizard, now. A fully-Healed, healthy wizard, who was still so still under the stasis charms. Riddle continued his word, nonverbally knitting the man's skin together with a drag of his wand and then a well-placed *Tergeo* to siphon up the blood.

Riddle took a step back, looking over his word, and then he nodded.

"Finished," he murmured, and then he turned to look at the matron at the wall. "Have him transported to the temp ward. Our work is done."

And he turned on his heel and left as if he hadn't just done the most intense and amazing piece of magic that Harry had ever seen in his entire life. Harry stared wordlessly at Eavius and he winced when his eyes began to sting with tears.

Immediately, he ran through the doors, nearly crashing into the matron on his way out. He skidded to a stop when he saw Riddle going over a stack of parchment, already over the work he had just done, the life he had just saved.

"That was amazing," Harry said, softly.

Riddle looked up, opening his mouth to say something snarky, no doubt. And then, he looked at Harry, really looked at him, and his face softened. His lips curled into the smallest smile and he nodded.

"Yes," Riddle said, instead.

"It's...at Hogwarts, we practiced on dummies. We read. A lot. And I thought I was going to know what it was going to feel like, standing there. In the theater. But, that was such a high," Harry whispered, and he felt so raw and honest, like an open wound.

Riddle cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"Yeah," Harry whispered.

"I should go...speak with the family," Riddle said.

He didn't make a move away, simply staring down at Harry.

"You should. See you around," Harry whispered.

Riddle nodded once and with one last look, he turned on his heel and strode down the hallway. Harry watched him, and when he thought about Riddle now, he didn't only think about the bruises on hips or the hickies on his collarbone. He thought about the way the man had commanded the magical theatre, like it was a stage.

Like he was a god.

Harry shook his head. His shift was over.

Time to go home.

DIAGNOSIS

“That was a good procedure,” Granger said as she settled down in the seat next to Harry. Harry looked up at her, unable to hold back his silly grin.

“Yeah,” he said, softly.

Granger rolled her eyes and she sat down next to him. “You don’t seem like the type to apologize,” she said, briskly.

“I’m not.”

“Neither am I,” Granger admitted. “I don’t like being wrong. I suspect you don’t like being wrong. So, we don’t have to do that thing where I say something, then you say something, and then there’s a moment.”

“Ew,” Harry said, his nose wrinkling.

Granger smirked. “You should get some sleep. You look terrible.”

“I look better than you, *Hermione*," Harry retorted. There was a long pause, the moment that they had adamantly been opposed to and Harry smiled anyway.

Hermione looked at him and smile, slowly standing up and she offered her hand.

“Come on, Harry. We’ll leave together,” Hermione said and Harry took her hand, allowing her to drag him up. They walked in a companionable silence to the trainee changing room.

Ron was already there, wearing a pair of corduroys and a button down, speaking excitedly to Neville. Neville’s face was flushed with pleasure, as if he had momentarily forgotten to be a perpetual nervous wreck. Harry grinned at the two.

“How was your shift?” Harry asked.

“Amazing,” Neville said, happily. “Snape...he’s a berk but...I brewed the Midas Touch Syndrome potion. I *did* it.”

"Didn't you bugger that up? I saw you," Harry said pointedly as he unbuttoned his robes and reached into his cupboard for his Muggle clothing. He pulled his jumper over his head and jumped up and down to pull up his too-tight jeans.

“Yeah. I did. But, then, Snape pulled Nev and me out of the contest and made us brew the potion for the past 12 hours!” Ron said, excitedly.

Hermione frowned. “Doesn’t that potion only take 3 hours?”

“We made four batches. We kept botching it,” Neville admitted.

“At least, you did it. I mean, no one knows so you’re still going to be called the Great Lump but…” Harry trailed off under Hermione’s withering look. “I mean, I’m going to sing your praises. Everyone will know that you conquered the great Midas Touch Syndrome potion.”

“No one’s going to believe you. But, we’ll support you anyway, Neville,” Hermione said pleasantly as she buttoned up her shirt. She looked over at Ron and frowned. “Stop ogling on me, you arse.”

“I *wasn’t*,” Ron said even as a blotchy flush spread across his pale cheeks.

Harry barked out a laugh, shaking his head. “Let’s go, Granger.”

“Thought it was ‘Hermione’ now,” Hermione teased as she slung her bag over her shoulder and bumped elbows with Harry as they walked out of the trainee room.

Harry opened his mouth to respond but the two staggered to a stop when they saw the Head Healer again, towering over Zacharias Smith, with a stern look on his face. Smith was shrinking under that electric gaze.

“Healer Smith, you mean to tell me that while you were running around attempting to solve *another* case, you allowed your patient to suffer? Seizures? Strokes? Blackouts? And you've no idea what it is," Dumbledore said. There was something about his voice that made even Harry's stomach twist into knots. He didn't seem like the type of man to ever be angry.

His disappointment was much, much worse.

“I...well, I...and she was…she’s already been treated, sir! On the Spell Damage floor!” Smith protested.

“And yet, she is still suffering,” Dumbledore finished.

“Maybe, it’s a pre-existing condition,” Harry found himself saying before he could stop himself. Smith and Dumbledore both turned to look at him, Smith glaring daggers.

“Harry…” Hermione hissed.

“It’s not a pre-existing condition. I did the work-up myself,” Smith said through clenched teeth.

Dumbledore raised a silver eyebrow. “Healer Smith, I find that your opinion on the matter may be skewed, seeing as you left a patient undiagnosed due to a petty contest. Do you understand why I feel this way?”

Smith swallowed hard. “Yes, sir.”

“What do you think is wrong the patient?” Dumbledore asked, curiously.

Harry cleared his throat, biting his bottom lip. "Even with a diagnostics spell, sometimes, it's hard to see what's happening, especially, if it's not Spell Damage. She was a Spell Damage patient but, I think there's something else happening. She's suffering as if she were a Muggle—strokes, blackouts, seizures. When you did the patient workup, did you ask her if she was a practitioner of any of the mind arts?" Harry asked, staring at Zacharias with narrowed eyes.

Smith’s lips curled into a sneer. “What?”

“They’re at the bottom of the questionnaire,” Hermione interjected, helpfully.

"If she's a practitioner of Legilimency, Occlumency, or has been Obliviated more than twice, she'd be an excellent candidate for Akhos-Lethe Syndrome. It wouldn't show up on a diagnostics spell because it's a Mind disease, and sometimes, you have to be looking for it," Harry said, firmly. He looked over at Dumbledore and the man had a twinkle in his electric blue eyes, almost hidden by the half-moon glasses perched on his crooked nose.

“How would you treat, Healer Potter?” Dumbledore asked.

“Potions to regulate the ‘strokes of genius’ that occur when a memory returns. Routine check-ups and regular usage of journals should ease the symptoms,” Harry said almost immediately. He didn’t ask or look unsure. He knew about this disease. He could almost remember his mother, when she was still a junior Healer, exploring her options, having a quick interest in Mind Healing.

It was always the incurable syndromes that had caught her interest.

“Do exactly as he says,” Dumbledore said firmly to Smith. “And after, tell your trainer I want you off this case.” He walked away from Smith.

Harry could feel Hermione vibrating with excitement as Dumbledore approached them.

“Healer Dumbledore,” Harry said, softly.

“I’d know you anywhere,” Dumbledore said with a small smile. Harry knew what to expect next. *You look just like your father but, you have your mother’s eyes.* “You’re the spitting image of your mother.”

Harry swallowed his surprise.

“Thank you, Healer,” Harry said, softly.

Dumbledore nodded and he winked at the two trainees. “Welcome to the game.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello. You inspired me. I got such an immediate response, full of support and love, and I was just so happy that I began to write the next chapter only a few hours after I got the first reviews. Thank you so much! I hope you enjoy this little story as much as I do.

EDIT (my citations):

Hela-Wasting Curse: http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/83037489149/hela-wasting-curse-technically-a-curse-and-not-a

Heart-Fragmenting Curse: http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/105129995775/spell-nanme-the-heart-fragmenting-curse

Davenport-Nosoi Syndrome - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/132762654256/davenport-nosoi-syndrome-a-chronic-magical-illness

Akhos-Lethe Syndrome - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/166020950584/akhos-lethe-syndrome-an-unfortunate-illness-known

Midas Touch Syndrome (Refer to last chapter for link)

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry stared up at the bulletin board. He made a move to hang up the simple sheet of parchment before pulling back again. He'd used his best penmanship, had even drafted it. And still, he hesitated. Every time he thought about hanging up the parchment declaring 'ROOMMATES WANTED', he came up with a thousand reasons why roommates were sincerely *not* wanted.

He didn't need roommates.

He was living rent-free and walked around his home in his pants. It was amazing. It was freeing.

It was also incredibly lonely, now that Walburga's portrait had finally been permanently silenced. Number 12 Grimmauld Place was dark and lonely and quiet, and going home to it every day reminded him of the never-ending pile of unanswered letters on his kitchen room table. He hadn't even written his sister back, and he had no problem with her. But, her letter covered Lily's.

"What are you doing?"

Harry jumped, spinning around and looking up at Ron with wide eyes. The redheaded man stared down his long nose, lazily nibbling at what was definitely his third granola bar of the morning. Harry hummed.

"Looking for roommates," Harry decided and he turned back around, tacking the parchment up against the board. He turned back around and jumped when he saw the rest of his team flanking Ron, all three pairs of eyes on the board.

"Where did you say you lived again?" Hermione asked, curiously, sounding deceptively sweet.

Harry pursed his lips. "Central London. Islington," he said, slowly.

"Hmm. Really?" Neville asked, his voice scooping upwards, still reading the fine print under the parchment. "And it's a wizarding home?"

"It's the Black ancestral home. It's my godfather's house. It's big and too hard to clean by myself," Harry said, flatly. "And I can't pay for groceries on my shitty Healer trainee salary."

Of course, there was the soul-crippling loneliness in the darkest house on the street but, Harry had only known these people for a month. He wasn't going to show them how dark and twisty he really was.

“Interesting,” Ron murmured. He took a step forward, grinning with his mouth full of crooked teeth. Harry was already regretting everything. “You want roommates. I’ll be your roommate.”

“No,” Harry said, firmly.

“Why not?” Hermione demanded, her arms crossed. “Why did you put up an ad if you don’t want roommates?”

“I want roommates. I just don’t want *you*,” Harry said, pushing past them and sighing when they followed after him, like eager little puppies. Or his sister’s eager little friends who didn’t understand the words ‘*I’m homosexual*’.

“My mom still washes my robes, Harry. And kisses me on the cheek every day! It’s humiliating!” Ron whined and Harry snorted, looking over his shoulder as they walked towards McGonagall.

“Yeah, that’s plenty humiliating,” Harry admitted. “But, I don’t want to be near you all. I see you every single bloody day for hours at a time. You want to be roommates too?”

“I live with my gran, Harry. She expects me to massage her feet because I’m a ‘Healer’. Take pity,” Neville said, as flatly as possible. Harry burst into laughter, throwing his head back and chuckling. He didn’t notice the way Neville’s cheeks pinked up.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Harry sighed, shaking his head.

“I bake.” All three men turned to look at Hermione in disbelief. Hermione stared back, unbending and serious. “I’m a stress baker, well-organized, and I clean.”

“I can clean! My mom is a homemaker. I know cleaning charms. I’m good at cleaning,” Ron said, pushing around Hermione to get into Harry’s face. Hermione’s lips curled in annoyance and she shoved Ron back.

“I just...Harry, I can’t live with my gran anymore. It’s just...*Harry*,” Neville whined.

Harry groaned, shaking his head. “I just want strangers who I don’t have to talk to or be nice to. Oh, look who it is. It’s Healer McGonagall. How are you this morning, Healer?” Harry asked as he walked up to their trainer. She looked back at him, as unamused as she always seemed. Harry had seen her exactly one time since he had met her; she’d been talking to Dumbledore at the time.

“Fine, Potter,” she said, flatly. She turned to the trainees at large. “Longbottom, you’ve been requested on Sprout’s service. Go help her in the greenhouses. Bring earmuffs. You’ll be dealing with Mandrakes. Weasley, Emergency & Triage training. Granger, you get patient workups and manning the pharmacy desk until closing. Potter, you’re brewing with Slughorn today. Get your lunch and meet him down there in an hour.”

Longbottom’s face brightened immediately. Ron and Harry exchanged gleeful looks, snickering over the outrage on Hermione’s face. McGonagall shoved a small scroll into

Harry's hands and Harry glanced over it: Skele-Gro, Pepperup, Calming Draught, Sleeping Draught.

"Merlin's beard, that sucks for you, doesn't it, Hermione?" Ron laughed though he was silenced by a single glare from McGonagall. Hermione's lips puckered up like she's just eaten a lemon drop.

"I'm not above paperwork," Hermione said, stiffly, lying through her teeth. "Everything's a learning experience."

"I'm glad you feel that way," McGonagall said, blankly. "Why are you still standing here?"

The four spun into action and Harry jogged forward towards the lift. He was decent at Potions. He'd gotten an E, so at least he wouldn't botch it as terrible as Neville. Smith and his cronies still called him the Great Lump, sometimes. Harry stepped over and waited in front of the lift, tapping his foot impatiently.

"Good morning."

Harry stiffened. He'd know that voice anywhere. He didn't turn around or respond, instead looking down at the running list of potions that he'd be brewing for the day.

"You know as an Englishman, I'm usually turned off by rudeness." Harry could hear the amusement in Riddle's words as if he didn't quite believe what he was saying himself. "But, with you, it's kinda hot."

Harry's cheeks flushed. He let out a long breath when he stepped into the lift, pleased that it was filled with people. Until all of those people streamed out around him, crossing through the ground floor. He backed up against the wall as Riddle stalked in, his eyes narrowed and his lips spread into a thin smirk.

Harry swallowed hard, leaning against the side of the lift, staring straight ahead. It was hard to pretend that he didn't feel those burgundy eyes staring holes into him.

The lift door closed and Riddle turned around, staring at the doors.

"I'm not going out with you," Harry said, fighting his smile.

"Did I ask you to go out with me?" Riddle asked. And then he paused, glancing over his shoulder. "Do you want to go out with me?"

"Stop it," Harry whined. "I'm not dating you and I'm definitely not sleeping with you. Ever again. You're my boss."

"Not directly. Yet. Are you thinking about Spell Damage? I think you'd be good," Riddle said, leaning against the wall to look at Harry properly. Harry swallowed as Riddle's eyes roved up and down. Harry looked stupid in his hunter green robes but, Riddle looked edible in emerald.

And damn him. He'd figured out Harry's weakness—praise of his abilities. Damn Tom Riddle.

"You're my teacher," Harry said, weakly.

Riddle's smirk widened into a grin. "That makes you hot, doesn't it?"

"You're sexually harassing me," Harry said, immediately.

Riddle's eyes widened with false innocence.

"I'm riding the lift!" he protested.

"I'm drawing a line. The line's been drawn. No one crosses it. You don't cross it. I don't cross it. There's a line," Harry babbled, nervously fidgeting with the small parchment roll in his hands. He shoved it into his pocket, swallowing hard.

"So, you're in danger of crossing this imaginary line, too, then?" Riddle asked.

Harry stared at Riddle. Riddle stared back.

"Fuck it," Harry breathed.

And then he threw himself at Riddle, crowding the taller man against the lift wall and he strained his neck, pressing their lips together. Riddle immediately wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close and up. Harry whimpered as he raked his hands through that deliciously moussed hair, licking and sucking at thin lips.

He burned hotter than he ever had, his body burning wherever Riddle touched. Harry pushed against him harder, grinding tight against him, dragging one hand down his hair, over his neck, down Tom's chest. Harry whined softly when he felt a large hand grab his arse and drag down his thigh. Riddle hauled him closer, pressing into the space between his legs.

Harry hissed.

His cock was hard.

The lift came to a stop and Harry threw himself back, wiping at his mouth, breathing so hard that he was never hyperventilating. The two men looked at one another and Riddle ran his hands through his hair.

"Nope," Harry whispered, backing out slowly, never looking away.

Riddle smirked. "So, how's that line looking, Harry?"

"You're an arse," Harry called behind him, running down the hall towards the potions labs. He swallowed when he heard the lift doors close again and he collapsed against the wall, tipping his head back.

Why did he do these things without thinking?

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione drummed her fingers against the countertop, sighing as the words started to blend together. She looked over the reports again, reading them twice before deciding to prescribe Miss Marietta Edgecombe bubotuber pus to combat her self-described ‘wicked acne’.

"Need three Antidotes for Common Poisons, two Calming Draughts, and burn-healing paste. Statum."

Hermione slowly rolled her eyes up to stare into Ron’s wide grin. Her eyes narrowed.

“I’m sorry, did you forget how to say the word ‘please’?” she said, her voice as wintery as she could possibly make it. Ron’s grin faltered, ever so slightly, but he continued to smirk at her, holding his shoulders back.

Hermione hated tall men like Ron. They liked to loom. Hermione *hated* looming.

“Aww, come on, Hermione. Don’t be angry. It’s not my fault you’re sitting at the pharmacy and I’m taking care of emergency cases,” Ron said, flexing his arms. Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed. She went to grab the potions that Ron had asked for, settling it in one of the baskets lined with cloth to keep the vials from cracking open.

“You know what, you’re an arse. No wonder Harry won’t let you move in,” Hermione barked, irritated and Ron scoffed.

“He won’t let any of us move in, *Hermione*. Why do you want to move in so bad anyway?” Ron demanded and Hermione rolled her eyes, crossing her arms.

“I live with my parents too. My Muggle parents who don’t really appreciate me waking up at all hours and getting in at all hours. They don’t really...get it,” Hermione said, simplifying her own personal problems. Really, her parents were thrilled that she was becoming a ‘doctor’, as they referred to her, but they didn’t really understand why she had to be a doctor in the magical world.

They complained that she was drifting farther and farther away, and constantly asked why she could be a dentist like them. Or a magical dentist. Or whatever.

“Well, Harry clearly doesn’t care about either of our problems, seeing as he’s being an arse about letting us move in. You know his godfather is Sirius Black? We could be living in the Black ancestral home. It’s huge. Living large...basically, rent-free since we’ll only have to clean and help with groceries,” Ron sighed, looking wide-eyed into the distance.

Hermione snorted. “Yeah, and we have to save all the Galleons we can. This pays nothing.”

“Once we’re specialists, we’ll be able to *swim* in Galleons,” Ron said, wistfully and Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Now, can you get out of my pharmacy? I have work to do and I want to finish it before lunch,” Hermione sighed. “Apparently, I have flat hunting to do.”

“I’d be willing to trade with you for the day,” Ron suggested.

Hermione brightened. “Really?”

Ron grinned. “No.”

“Sod off, *Ronald*.”

"You can have my case if you want, Matron Granger. And I need Skele-Gro," Smith drawled as he sauntered up to the counter. He slammed the bell just to be annoying and smirked across the counter at her.

“What did you just say? Did you just call me a ‘matron’?” Hermione hissed.

Smith smirked. “You’re a woman, you’re sitting at the *pharmacy* doing paperwork, and you’re bossy. If the white robes fit,” Smith said. He leaned forward, winking at her. “Now, if you’d like a real case, you can take mine. I have two broken legs in the Children’s Ward. You seem like you’d be a better fit and all. Being maternal and all.”

Ron took a step back, holding his basket tight to his chest as he looked from Hermione to the stupid idiot that had decided to *antagonize* Hermione.

“Did you just imply that I should be in the Children’s Ward because I have a *uterus*?" Hermione snarled, her voice low. Smith smirked, winking at her as he strutted up to the pharmacy desk, sliding over the request form. Ron looked just as offended, which Hermione did appreciate.

“Maybe you’ll get along better with the loony bitch in charge. She looks twelve and she’s got turnips hanging from ears and Butterbeer caps around her neck. Now, I need that Skele-Gro. Chop, chop, Matron Granger,” Smith said, clapping at her.

Hermione froze and slowly she drew her wand.

“*Avis*,” she hissed and Smith scoffed when she conjured the little yellow birds in the air. They circled her head, chirping loudly.

“That the best you can—”

“*Oppugno.”*

Smith shrieked as the yellow birds darted at him like arrows, turning into little balls of bright yellow fury. Hermione’s lips curled into a righteous grin as Smith screamed in pain, batting away the birds, making them explode into little yellow feathers. Ron’s mouth fell open as Smith ran back down the hall towards the lifts.

“I’ll send Ron with your Skele-Gro! Thank you for your patronage!” Hermione called, cheerfully. Smugly, she leaned back in her chair and turned her unamused eyes onto Ron.

“Anything else, Ron?”

“You...are...scary,” Ron whispered.

Hermione’s lips curled into a smirk. “Thanks. Now, take your potions and fuck off.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry knocked on the doorframe, peering into the practice lab.

“Just a moment,” Horace Slughorn called as he peered into his cauldron. Harry took a moment to evaluate the older man.

Horace Slughorn was an immense, old man with a round, bald head and bright eyes. His belly was so large and round that his robes were stretched taut around it. His gooseberry colored eyes looked small in his round, squished face that was largely dominated by a bushy walrus-like mustache. Harry cleared his throat.

“Harry Potter, reporting for duty,” Harry called.

Slughorn looked up, his eyes wide. “O-ho! Harry Potter, as I live in breathe. Come in, dear boy,” Slughorn said and his eyes drank Harry in. Harry squirmed under the man’s judgment. He knew the look in his eyes.

Lust never looked good when it wasn’t returned.

“Hi, Healer Slughorn. It’s very nice to meet you,” Harry said, striding forward and holding out his hand over the cauldron. Slughorn took it, pumping it up and down and he squeezed rather hard. When he finally released Harry’s fingers, Harry flexed his hand, attempting to get the feeling back. “I saw the list of what we’re brewing today. Should be easy?”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Slughorn said, cheerfully. He waved Harry to his side, in front of an extra cauldron and burner. He looked over at Harry, slyly. “I’ve nearly finished the Sleeping Draught and Pepperup Potions. I’ll need you on the Cure for Boils and Skele-Gro. I would do it myself but...”

“Really simple,” Harry said, full of false cheer. He hesitated. “Why did you request me, then? If you could do it yourself?”

Slughorn made an exaggerated gasp, holding his hand to his round chest. “To meet *you*, of course.”

“To meet me?” Harry asked, suddenly uncertain, as he began to prep the ingredient for the Cure for Boils. He turned towards the ingredients stores and grabbed a small wooden basket to load his ingredients in.

Dried nettles, snake fangs, horned slugs, and porcupine quills. He laid them out gently before returning to his station.

“I know your mother,” Slughorn said, brightly. Harry’s reasonable mood fell dramatically. “Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming woman.”

Harry swallowed as he pulled out six snake fangs and dropped into the mortar. Rather aggressively, he began to grind with the pestle, attempting to drown out the irritation that was brewing in the pit of his stomach.

“I’m sure,” Harry allowed. He added four measures of the crushed fangs to his carefully simmering golden cauldron. At least, since he was using a gold cauldron, he could brew it all three times as fast and wouldn’t have to suffer.

Apparently, Slughorn was one of *those*—the type to wax and fawn about his dear mother.

Slughorn didn’t seem to notice. “Your mother is a Muggle-born, of course. I couldn’t *believe* it when I found out. I thought she was a pure-blood, she’s just so good,” Slughorn said and he looked up at Harry, cheekily. “I’m sure that you must have some of her raw, natural talent.”

Harry suppressed his snort as he glared down into his cauldron. “I sure hope so,” he murmured.

Slughorn didn’t sense his sarcasm. They continued to work in silence as Harry let the potion simmer. Harry began to work on the Skele-Gro potion in the pewter cauldron. He gathered the scarab beetles and the puffer-fish and began to get to work, chopping and grinding.

“She’s going to change the world, Harry, mark my words. Her work is going to revolutionize everything. When people think medicine, they’ll think *Evans*,” Slughorn said, firmly, as if he’d never stopped speaking. “And they should. She’s done so much. I hope you’ll be able to catch up.” He punctuated with a wink.

And Harry wasn’t sure what it was about those words that bothered him the most. He had heard many people speak about his mother. He had heard people sing her praises or curse her name. Even his *friends* had fawned over her until Harry’s glares had nipped that in the bud. But, there was something about this man with his infuriating condescension that made Harry snap.

“I’m not going to catch up,” Harry bit out. Slughorn looked at him in surprise as Harry threw in four horned slugs. He snatched it off the fire, added the porcupine quills, and began to stir clockwise. He waved his wand over the Curse for Boils potion, completing it in record time. He looked up at Slughorn. “I’m not going to *just* catch up. Healer Slughorn, I’m Harry Potter.”

As he said that he began to bottle the potion into the empty vials waiting on the counter.

“I-I know, dear boy,” Slughorn stammered.

"I don't think you do," Harry said firmly. "I'm Harry Potter, and I'm not going to just catch up. I'm going to be the greatest Healer this hospital has ever seen. That this world has ever seen. One day, there's going to be a kid at Hogwarts or Beauxbatons or Ilvermorny who's going to take the Healing elective their seventh year, and my name will be at the top of the syllabus. My name will be listed over and over again. My mother's a legend. I'll be a god instead."

He gathered the filled vials into the little basket and ignored Slughorn's sputtering.

"I'll be taking these to the pharmacy. Do you need me, Healer?" Harry finished.

Slughorn swallowed and slowly shook his head. Harry nodded back and stormed out, flying to the lift, powered by his irritation. Every step he took farther and farther away from the irritating little man relieved some of Harry's burning rage. He looked over at the bulletin on the wall, the one that was opposite every single lift on every floor and his eyes lit up with interest.

So, they weren't shadowing McGonagall because she was *operating.* Wicked.

Harry felt his annoyance dissipate as he walked into the lift, went up a floor and then, went straight to the pharmacy. He snorted when he saw Hermione slowly falling asleep at the counter.

"So, not above paperwork?" Harry called.

Hermione jerked away, nearly sliding off her hand and slamming her chin. She huffed, rolling her eyes as Harry dropped the basket on the counter and she took it, going to place them on the shelves that they belonged.

"I *finished* all of my paperwork. Harry, I'm going to die here," Hermione groaned. "I need to be doing magic. Healing people. Not...*this*."

"That sounds dangerously close to whining, Granger," Harry warned.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Whatever. What are you doing here?"

"Slughorn is an Evans sycophant. I finished my potions and ran," Harry said.

Hermione laughed softly as she finished shelving the potions and she turned back to Harry, her lips pursed.

"Well, feel free to take my spot at the pharmacy."

"It's closing soon anyway," Harry said immediately. "Are you really going to flat hunt after your shift?"

"Well, seeing as my *friend* doesn't want me to move in—"

"No, no. Don't call me that!" Harry whined, clapping his hands over his ears. Hermione burst into a fresh round of laughter as she looked at him, completely incredulous.

“Don’t call you ‘friend’. You are *so* damaged,” Hermione giggled.

Harry stuck his tongue out at her.

“Come on. McGonagall is treating a patient with chronic Galatea Virus,” Harry said, tugging her from behind the pharmacy counter. Hermione frowned, glancing at the clock.

It *was* getting to closing time.

“You said ‘chronic’ Galatea Virus?” Hermione asked. Even as she asked, began to close up, casting down the magical ward charms and setting the Caterwauling Charm in place. Harry grinned at her, rocking back and forth. “McGonagall is a Spell Damage specialist. What is she doing, operating on a Magical Diseases patient?”

“They’re short-staffed. It’s always been a small department,” Harry said. “They don’t even have a proper head right now. Just some odd girl. Anyway, it’s chronic. That means she’ll be *shaving*. Let’s see if we can take a piece.”

“That’s a little gross,” Hermione said as she walked through the door and locked it properly. Harry bumped her in her side as they walked towards the lifts.

"But, bloody cool, right?" Harry asked pointedly. Hermione's lips twitched into a smile. Harry bounced into the lift and he pressed the second-floor button. He looked over at Hermione with wide eyes, wiggling his eyebrows mischievously. “This is going to be amazing.”

“You think *every* operation is amazing,” Hermione chided gently.

"So do you," he accused as they exited the lift, walking the halls towards the Magical Disease theatres. Harry pointed towards the first door and they slowly entered the gallery. He was pleasantly surprised to find it empty.

The theatre was less so.

The girl on the table couldn’t have been more than sixteen. His sister was probably a little older.

Her face was *covered* with crystals. They were stunning—a glacial mixture of purple and blue stalactites jutting from her face in different directions. McGonagall held her wand in one hand and an athame in the other. She was slowly carving away at the stalactites and then cauterizing it with magic, revealing beautiful satin brown skin.

“You said it’s chronic?” Hermione asked in wonder as they took their seats at the front of the gallery, leaning forward.

McGonagall paused in her work to look up into the gallery. Her eyes narrowed on Hermione and Harry and she opened her mouth to say something before she shook her head, seeming to have thought better about it. It was the closest thing to approval that either one would get.

“That’s what the board said. No cure for viruses yet. It looks pretty severe,” Harry said, slightly dismayed. If the virus wasn’t so terribly inconvenient, Harry would think that the Galatea Virus was actually rather pretty. Other Hogwarts students wouldn’t think so because children were mean but, Harry could appreciate a good magical virus.

“But, it’s definitely manageable. She probably comes every few months for a weekend treatment and then good as new. And doesn’t Galatea Virus have dormant stages?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I think so but, I don’t know hers. She might be seasonal. How would you prescribe, Healer Granger?” Harry asked, a wicked smile on his face as he turned to look at her.

Hermione pursed her lips in order to hide her amusement. “Quarterly visits to St. Mungo’s. Regular hydration spells to balance the amount of salt and water in her body. Low-sodium diet. Of course. Simple,” Hermione said in her *best* Healer voice.

Harry snorted. “You recited that from a book.”

“Doesn’t make it not right,” Hermione taunted.

Harry rolled his eyes and looked back into the theatre. He winced as he made eye contact with a pair of burgundy eyes. Riddle’s lips twitched into a slow smirk as he relaxed against the far wall, paying more attention to Harry than the procedure he was supposed to be taking part in.

“What is *he* doing here? He’s Spell Damage,” Harry hissed under his breath.

“You’re the one that said Magical Diseases is understaffed. Maybe, he’s back-up? Not that *McGonagall* needs back-up,” Hermione drawled. She paused. “Legality issues, maybe. She is underage.”

Harry swallowed when Riddle winked up at him and he finally tore his gaze away to look at McGonagall. Hermione's eyes narrowed at him.

“Don’t react,” Harry said, never taking his eyes off of McGonagall as she worked over the poor girl, pretending that he didn’t feel those *eyes*.

“Oh...Harry, you didn’t,” Hermione said.

“What? You don’t even know what I was going to say,” Harry whined.

Hermione snorted. “Really? I don’t? You say that every time you tell me about *something* Riddle did. And don’t pretend it’s not Riddle. You only started acting weird when you saw him.”

“What do you mean I say—” Harry argued.

“‘Don’t react. Riddle asked me out. But, I said no. You should be *proud*’. ‘Don’t react. I had a sex dream about Riddle’. ‘Don’t react but, I think Riddle’s trying to ask me out for drinks’. ‘Don’t react—” Hermione mocked, her voice taking on a low-pitched whine.

“Shut up! I don’t sound like that,” Harry retorted.

Hermione looked at him, uncannily resembling McGonagall. “You always sound like that. What am I not supposed to react to today, Harry?”

“I...kissed him. In the lift. It was really good,” Harry whispered.

Hermione gasped. “Harry!”

“I’m *sorry*. We haven’t been alone...and then we were and then he was being all hot and charming and...dammit, I’m weak,” Harry said, burying his face in his hands.

Hermione shook her head as she looked at the man that was quickly becoming one of her closest friends. She leaned back into her chair and watched as McGonagall cast another spell to hydrate the patient. The crystals jutting from her face was largely formed of salt, though purple they appeared.

“Why did you kiss him?” Hermione allowed.

Harry swallowed hard. “He’s just so...Hermione, he’s just so damn attractive. And he’s such a *good* Healer. Hermione...when I was in that magical theatre. If I wasn’t so inspired, I would’ve been hard,” Harry said, firmly, ignoring Hermione’s squeal of disgust, and the way her cheeks pinked up. She slowly turned to him, shaking her head.

“Harry. No more kissing our boss in lifts. It’s not a good idea,” she warned.

Harry slumped in his chair. “I *know.*”

“You’re going to get fired,” she hissed.

Harry turned on her, eyes blazing. “I *know*, Hermione.”

“I don’t think you do,” Hermione snapped back. “You’re going to be one of the greatest Healers in *history*. Don’t screw it up for a man.”

Harry swallowed, nervously. “You really think that? That I’ll be great?”

Hermione’s eyes softened. “Of course, I do. You’re talented. You’re going to be the greatest. After me, of course,” Hermione added as an afterthought.

Harry snorted. “Shut up, Granger.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Marvelous procedure, Minerva,” Albus said as the trio watched the matron escort the young Hogwarts student from the theatre. Riddle followed after her, barking out post-procedure

orders at the young matron.

“Thank you. She’ll be back though,” Minerva said, sounding rather regretful.

Albus hummed, nodding. “There isn’t a cure yet.”

“There probably won’t be a cure, ever,” Severus said under his breath, ignoring the looks from both of his older colleagues. His eyes drifted over towards the two trainees—Granger and Potter. His lips curled in irritation as they whispered to one another, eyes never leaving the patient floating away. “Don’t they have anything to do?”

“They’re trainees. They’re learning. Minerva, I’m glad to see that your trainees have such an interest in one of our smaller departments,” Albus said with a jovial smile.

Minerva gave a thin-lipped smile. “I’m sorry to say, Abus, but those two...Spell Damage. Mark my words.”

"Potter? Spell Damage? I would've marked him from Artifact Accidents," Severus said, bitingly and Albus' eyes narrowed at him, though he hadn't crossed the line into irritation just yet.

Serenely, the Head Healer said, “There are no lesser departments.”

Severus scoffed, not quite answering.

“Harry Potter wouldn’t be caught dead in Artifact Accidents,” Riddle said as he strode over, watching the two trainees walk off, his eyes narrowed on their backs. “He’ll be a Spell Damage specialist. A great one.”

“High praise from *you*, Tom. We’ll have to look out for both of them,” Albus said with a sharp little smile. He looked over at the younger man, the only one of equal height to him. “Thank you, Tom.”

“For what?” Severus sneered as he looked over at his professional rival. Riddle only stared back at him with cool amusement. He always had that condescending look in his burgundy eyes, as if he thought himself superior to Severus in some way.

“Albus asked me to participate in today’s procedure through observation. He had meetings with a few politicians from the Ministry, and as this could potentially be a liability case, someone had to be acting Head in the room,” Riddle drawled. He turned back to Minerva and Albus, affecting a more pleasant look on his face. “Minerva, I’ll have her placed in the Children’s Ward after she’s in the clear. Albus, I’ll have my drafted proposal to you in a few weeks.”

“Of course,” Albus said with a genial smile. The three Healers watched as Riddle sauntered away, unbearably smug.

Severus turned on Albus nearly immediately.

“When did you start considering Riddle as your successor?” Severus said through clenched teeth, looking up at the older man. Albus stared down at him, plainly. “I do more for this hospital than any other Healer.”

“Severus, I know you don’t care for Tom. But, you do only exactly as much as is necessary. You never take an extra step, you never give an extra minute. You’re comfortable and sometimes, too arrogant. It doesn’t impress me,” Albus said in that voice that was just as pleasant as it was deeply cutting. Severus winced under those sharp blue eyes.

“And Riddle *isn’t* arrogant?” Severus sneered.

Albus hummed. “I never said that. But, Tom continues to want to learn for learning’s sake. He is...*hungry* for the next discovery. You’ve only continued your work for the paycheck,” Albus said, firmly and Severus winced at the cutting assessment.

Still, he knew Albus was being kind. He was being kind enough not to mention that Severus had never wanted to be a Healer, not really, and it showed. He didn’t mention that he’d only come to St. Mungo’s, only done some of his research, because he’d follow Lily, his beacon, *anywhere*. Once, when they had both been drunk after the annual St. Mungo’s benefit, Albus asked him that dreadful question: After all this time?”

And Severus had said, *Always.*

"I can do research if that's what you want. I could make grand discoveries like Tom and Lily and—” Severus snarled out, angrily.

“Then, do that,” Albus interrupted. “Research, dedicate your time to your patients and the students, prove that you want it. Then, I’ll consider you in the running again. If you’ll excuse me.”

Albus nodded to Minerva again and with one last considering look at Severus, he walked away, as if he had not just shattered Severus’ image of his future.

Severus had always been so sure that he’d eventually be Head Healer. It was not something Lily had ever wanted. She could care less about bureaucrats and liability issues. She only wanted her work. Severus had thought Riddle the same but, now, it seemed that the man thought he could have his cake and eat it too. Severus wouldn’t let *that* happen.

Severus glanced over at Minerva who was watching him with a strangely interested expression.

“Do you…” Severus trailed off, wincing at the terribly childish question that he was about to ask. Minerva stared at him, expectant and bored. Severus sighed out his frustration, shaking his head. “Do you think I’m too confident?”

“I think you’re cocky. Arrogant. You have a God complex. And you need to *teach*, Severus, instead of caring about yourself and Lily Evans,” Minerva said, flatly, cutting through all of Severus’ bullshit in seconds, as she had always been good at doing. Almost as good as Lily.

Severus looked at her, stricken.

“I’m not—”

“Severus, I was your teacher, many years ago. I know what you’re capable of. And you’re not reaching your full potential. Tom and Lily? Well, they strive for greatness. Whether for knowledge or greatness’ sakes, it doesn’t matter, because they push,” Minerva said as she looked at her one of her best and favorite students. Her eyes softened as she regarded the man.

“And because they decide to do their little projects, that makes them more qualified for the position of Head Healer?” Severus demanded.

Minerva shook her head. “No, they’re more qualified because they *care*. Start *caring*.”

“I ca—”

“Don’t *lie* to me,” Minerva said, sharply. She drummed her fingers against the railing as they stood on the bridge that overlooked the entirety of the entrance hall. She sighed when she felt her wand vibrate and a fountain of yellow sparks erupted.

Not urgent but, definitely important. Her Galatea Virus patient needed to be hydrated again, and no doubt, the young matron had no idea how to do it.

“I’m not lying,” Severus said, stubbornly.

Minerva sighed. “Think about this, Severus. Think about why you became a Healer. No, we all know why you’re a Healer. Think about why, even now, when she’s gone and married and she has two kids—one of them being a Healer trainee—you’re still a Healer. Why are you still a Healer? Then, you’ll know if you care.”

DIAGNOSIS

“What are you up to after this?” Hermione asked as they tried to finish up another massive round of discharge paperwork in the Emergency & Triage Center. “Shift’s almost done.”

Harry hummed. “Ordering takeout, probably. I don’t have any groceries,” Harry sighed and Hermione nodded. He waited for her to push about how *she* could help buy groceries if she moved in but, she didn’t say anything.

“My parents are taking me out to dinner,” she said. “We’re celebrating my first month of surviving training.”

Harry forced a smile on his face as he signed the bottom of the discharge papers, slapping them shut. He wondered what his parents would say if they all went out to dinner. Well, first, he’d be shocked to see them in the same country. His parents loved each other *dearly* but,

they also adored their work, probably a little too much. When Harry had been a kid, his father and his godfather had been hit wizards, jetting off around the UK, and Europe, at large, to protect the population from Dark forces.

Once both Harry and his sister had been at Hogwarts, the roles had switched and Lily had started to attend more conferences while James had worked in the London-based Auror office. Neither had ever resented the other, preferring to be more excited about their work achievements, but Harry and his sister had sure as hell resented *them.*

“That’s great. Wow, I can’t believe it’s been a month,” Harry said, softly. Hermione gave a tiny smile, nodding in agreement. Harry looked down at his own paperwork, the words blurring together. Harry looked up. “You still want to move in, don’t you?”

Hermione nodded. “I do.”

“Why?” Harry barked.

“You shouldn’t be alone,” Hermione said, honestly. “I know you’d be happy to be alone. But, you shouldn’t be.”

Harry scoffed, looking down at his paperwork. Hermione didn’t know him half as well as she thought but, she was probably the person that knew him best. He wasn’t sure if it was sad or not that the person that knew him best was a girl that he’d quite literally met a month ago. He had no friends from Hogwarts. He hadn’t made friends easily.

His best friends were the three dumbasses that were trying to move into his Merlin-damned house.

I know you’d be happy to be alone. But you shouldn’t be.

Harry sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He could claim that but, it wasn’t because he thought he’d be happy alone. It was because he thought if he loved someone, and then it fell apart, he wouldn’t make it. It’d be easier to be alone. He didn’t want to need them. If he needed them, then what would happen if he lost them?

Losing people was like magical core damage. It was like dying, except dying ended.

“You give a lot of shits for someone who claims they don’t give a shit,” Harry said instead.

Hermione's eyes narrowed at him. "Who said I didn't give a shit?" she barked.

“I...didn’t expect you to give a shit,” Harry admitted.

“Well, get fucking used to it,” Hermione snapped, angrily. She slid the rest of the discharge papers to him. “And for being such an arse, you can finish my discharge papers. You don’t have to be alone, Harry. You choose it, so stop being such a berk, and let me *give* a shit.”

Harry swallowed hard, watching her storm away as her words echoed in his ears.

Let me give a shit.

DIAGNOSIS

Finally, finished, Harry let out a massive sigh and slid the paperwork towards the impatiently waiting matron. Harry nodded at her and stood, reaching over his head to crack his spine back into place. He walked away, finally done with his long day and hummed.

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry stood at the lift, biting his lower lip, pretending not to notice the man approaching his side.

“How was your day?” Riddle asked.

Harry bit his bottom lip. “I brewed with Horace Slughorn,” Harry admitted, his voice nearly a whisper, and Riddle scoffed. Harry glanced at the taller man from the corner of his eye. “What?”

"I'm sure he spent his time with you either hitting on you or waxing poetics about your mother. He's a sad, old man. But, he's friends with Albus," Riddle said as if that explained everything.

Harry shivered at how accurate the man’s words.

“Hm, yeah,” Harry whispered, careful not to look the man head-on.

The conversation lulled into a heavy, though not uncomfortable, silence.

“You want to know what I think?” Riddle asked as they stood side by side. They were too close, the back of their hands brushing against one another. Harry couldn’t find it in himself to move away. He stared straight ahead, waiting for the doors to slide open.

“What do you think, Healer?” Harry asked.

“I think that you want me and you’re too afraid to admit it. You don’t like admitting that you’re wrong to yourself,” Riddle taunted.

Harry hummed. “You’re entitled to your wrong opinion,” he decided. His lips curled into a small smile and he heard the sharp burst of laughter emerge from Riddle’s mouth before the man swallowed the rest of his amusement. “I’m taking the stairs.”

Harry turned away and walked towards the stairwell. He heard the words, “No self-control!” echo after him, and he just smiled harder.

As he ran down the stairs, two steps at a time, he felt the day drain away from him. He bound through the Entrance Hall and walked into the trainee changing room, where he saw a few trainees—including Smith and Patil—crowded around his parchment announcement. Harry

slowly pushed his way to the front of the bulletin board and pulled it down. He ignored all of the groans of irritation.

“It’s only been up for a day!” Patil complained.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry, I've found roommates," he said as an explanation.

He heard Ron’s squawk.

“What do you mean? Already?” Ron demanded.

Hermione huffed as she pulled her shirt over her head and leaned in against the cupboards. “I didn’t even get a chance to present my ten-step plan to you. Harry, I really think you should consider—”

“I think he means us,” Neville interrupted. Ron and Hermione glanced over at Neville but, a shy smile was slowly spreading across Neville’s face. “You mean us, don’t you?”

Harry huffed. “Yeah, I *guess.* But, I’m not helping you move any of your crap,” he said. Before he could even finish, Ron was launching himself at Harry, wrapping him in a hug made of long arms and crushing affection. Harry whined, trying to pull away as Ron ruffled his hair. “Get off me!”

“This is going to be so awesome! We’ll get to spend even *more* time together. Wait, I get my own room, right?” Ron asked, though his arms only moved to around Harry’s neck, choking him. Harry shoved roughly at him, staggering away and rubbing at the column of my neck.

"You're a child! Yes, you get your own room. Move in on Saturday." Harry's eyes narrowed. "I'll have the chore chart set up by then."

Neville groaned. “What kind of state is Grimmauld Place in?” Neville asked.

Harry barked out a laugh. “I’m the first person to live in it ten years. Get ready to *clean,* assholes.”

Harry changed quickly, walking away from his friends even as they thanked him profusely, saying more and more absurd things the longer he let them. When he finally escaped them, he wandered over to the Apparition area and Disapparated on the spot, appearing on his doorstep. Harry pulled his key out from his jeans’ pocket and slowly entered the empty, dark Entrance Hall.

He barely paid any attention as he kicked off his shoes by the stairs and continued past them to the kitchen. He slid in and looked at the pile of letters waiting for him. He sat down in front of them, placing Lily’s to the side, hiding them under an old copy of The Daily Prophet. He sighed as he looked at his Dad’s letters and tore them open, reading them quickly.

Anecdotes about the Auror Office. Lunches with Padfoot and Moony. Questions about whether he was enjoying St. Mungo’s, whether he hated Snivellus yet, and if he had met Albus yet. They all made Harry smile. He promised that he’d respond later.

He looked at his sister's letter. He opened it quickly and grinned when he saw her customary greeting: *Hey bro-bro*. It was a long list of the current gossip at Hogwarts. Harry could somewhat recognize some names but, largely, he was only really interested in his sister's hilarious commentary. After a brief mention of her classes, it was only a list of questions. She wanted to know if it was as amazing as he'd hoped if he were making friends, if he was feeding himself.

"*Accio* parchment and quill," Harry called, waving his wand.

He watched as a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill zoomed towards him, fluttering gently to the kitchen table. He picked it up and smiled.

Hey sis,

You've just gotten back to Hogwarts and you're already writing me? You must miss me a lot. I miss you. I've been kinda shit lately, haven't I? I haven't answered any of your letters from this summer but, I'm going to answer this one. Because I can't be a shitty big brother. That would totally ruin my cool cred with all your crazy little friends.

Okay, so, St. Mungo's is even better *than Mum described. It's...well, fantastic...*

Chapter End Notes

My finger slipped. Here's another chapter.

EDIT (citations):

Galatea Virus - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/88515483971/galataea-virus-one-of-a-few-viruses-named-for-a

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were loud.

They were so damn *loud*.

Harry groaned as he tossed and turned in his bed, pulling his pillow over his head. Even from a floor up, he could hear his three housemates laughing and joking in the kitchen, the clinking of dishes. Harry shut his eyes tight and groaned, attempting to will himself back to sleep.

A dish crashed into the kitchen and there was a loud yelp.

So, sleep was something that wasn't going to happen, then.

Harry groped his side table for his glasses and wand, jamming his glasses on his face and lazily casting a spell. "*Tempus*."

As Harry caught sight of the time, he felt his heart stop. And then, he threw himself out of bed, falling to the ground with a loud thump. He whined and jumped up, running towards his wardrobe, sifting through it for an appropriate outfit. He yanked out an oversized jumper from an old conquest at Hogwarts and wrestled a pair of jeans onto his body. They were holey and nearly falling apart but, they would do.

Barefoot, he ran from the room, crashing down the stairs, and he threw himself into the kitchen.

His housemates all looked up at him, owl-eyed. There was a breakfast spread on the kitchen table. Toast with jams and butter, fluffy scrambled eggs—the only thing Ron could make—and muffins, probably courtesy of Hermione. Neville slowly took a bite out of his toast, his head tilted in confusion."

"Good morning to you too," Hermione said.

"I'm late," Harry said as a greeting, reaching for a piece of toast off Neville's plate.

"Get your own food!" Neville protested.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Didn't you hear me say I'm late? For once, thank Merlin, for your inconsiderate screaming."

"It's nearly noon," Ron retorted.

Harry pretended that he didn't hear the man, instead munching on the toast. It went down his throat dry and he coughed, lightly. He danced across the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards for a mug.

"There's tea, if you want," Hermione called.

Harry's lip curled. It was too early for tea. Tea wouldn't wake him up or give him the will to go on. Coffee, it would be.

"No, thanks," Harry said. "What were you all screaming about this morning?"

He didn't see them all exchanged glances. Neville poked Ron in the shoulder and waved his hand towards Harry. Harry swallowed a mouthful of eggs and cleared his throat.

"We were thinking of throwing a housewarming party!" Ron declared.

Neville, Ron, and Hermione all started speaking over one another, eager in their agreement. Harry rolled his eyes as he banged on the magical coffee machine, trying to make it work. He sighed in relief as it began to spit out the black sludge that he needed to get through the day.

"It's not a housewarming party if I was already living here," Harry said, dryly. He picked up his drink and downed it, wincing as it scalded his tongue, setting it on fire but suddenly it felt numb.

Well, there went his taste buds.

"We weren't living here. Everyone should see our new place," Hermione said.

Harry scoffed. "This place is dark and sad and filthy."

"Like your soul," Neville muttered under his breath.

Harry drew his wand, pointing it. "What was that, Neville?"

"I mean...you're not the only dark and twisty person in the house. I could be talking about anyone," Neville said, slowly looking over at Hermione. Hermione scoffed, rolling her eyes.

"I am not—"

"Yes, you are," Ron and Neville said together.

Harry pursed his lips. "Look. You want to throw a party? Fine. Just...don't be arses about it. I've got to go."

"Where are you going? We have work tonight!" Hermione called as Harry tossed his mug in the sink and grabbed his bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

"I know that. I have lunch with my godfather—our landlord—and my father," Harry said, wincing as he thought about his dad.

“You...you’ve literally never spoken about your dad,” Hermione murmured.

“Yeah, you know how I don’t really like my mum? I don’t really fuck with my dad either. But, I’m going to be the adult. Look at that...we’re adults now!” Harry crowed, full of false enthusiasm as he backed out of the condition. He ignored their wide-eyed nervousness. “When did that happen?”

The three watched as Harry disappeared from the kitchen and just a few moments later, out of the house. They all looked at one another.

“Merlin, he’s a mess of mommy *and* daddy issues,” Ron said.

Hermione smacked him over the head with *The Daily Prophet*.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” she warned. “Now, who are we inviting to this party?”

"I was thinking some of the younger matrons," Ron said, waggling his eyebrows at Neville. Neville flushed though his lips quirked up into a small smile. "Thank Merlin that Harry agreed. I've been telling people about this for a week and, there's this one fit blonde nurse that I'd like to...talk to."

Hermione gagged.

“Disgusting,” Hermione muttered. She shook it off and looked at all of them. “Jocks only. That means Spell Damage, E&T, Mind, and Creature-Induced.”

“We can’t just leave out Potions and Poison!” Neville squawked. He suddenly fell quieter and looked down. “And...I may have invited the Head of the Children’s Ward. She’s quirky but cool.”

“You invited the primary schoolers?” Hermione demanded. She groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You know what…we’ll just spread this word of mouth. Try to get some more alcohol. Now, we don’t have much time. We have a 6-hour shift today. Let’s get this shit together.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry paused outside of the cafe area and took a deep breath. He straightened his jumper and jacket in the cafe window's reflection and then nodded once. He stared at the outside area, and saw them, quietly talking to one another. Harry pasted a small smile on her face and he nodded at the host as we walked over to the small garden table.

Aurors Sirius Black and James Potter looked up, bright smiles spreading across their faces as Harry settled himself in the chair across from them.

“Harry! How are you?” Sirius asked, reaching across the table to clap Harry’s shoulder. He squeezed once, smiling softly.

Harry swallowed his nerves. “I’m good! It’s good to see you,” he smiled. Then, his gaze softened as he looked at his father for the time in months. “To see you both.”

“I’ve missed you, Harry,” James said, solemnly.

Harry’s smile widened somewhat and a rush of warmth spread through his entire body. Instead of figuring out how an emotionally adjusted person would respond, he awkwardly looked at the menu, searching for something cheap and filling. He paused over the bangers and mash. He winced when he felt eyes on him and slowly he looked up. They were both staring at him with wide eager smiles.

“What?” Harry muttered.

“Just...you’re a *Healer*,” James said, looking at his son in awe. “I’m so proud of you, Harry!”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “I’m not a Healer yet though. I’m just a trainee.”

“You’ve already assisted on a procedure! I know that you assisted on Riddle’s internal procedure on your first day. That’s a massive accomplishment!” Sirius cheered and Harry swallowed at the mention of Riddle.

“Yeah, I did. But, it could’ve easily been my friend Hermione too.”

James and Sirius exchanged long looks.

“You have *friends*?” James asked, softly. “Tell us about them.”

“Well...they’re my housemates too,” Harry allowed.

Sirius’ eyes widened. “So, you’re not living in that decrepit hole all by yourself? That’s good! That’s really good, Harry. Tell us about your friends.”

“They’re my team. Hermione Granger. She’s a Muggleborn. She’s incredible. Really smart and talented. A bit of an asshole sometimes, but all intelligent people are. She wants to be a Spell Damage specialist. Like me. And then, there’s Ron Weasley—” Harry said.

“I know the Weasleys! His dad works at the Ministry?” James asked.

Harry looked at him in surprise and he slowly nodded. “Yeah, he does. Ron wants to be Spell Damage but, I don’t know if that’ll be what he does. He’s got a lot of talent too but, I don’t think he really *likes* Spell Damage. I think he wants the glory. It’s the glamorous one. And then, there’s Neville Longbottom. You *definitely* know his parents.”

“Yeah. Alice and Frank,” Sirius said, firmly. Harry nodded in confirmation. “Alice is the hit wizard and Frank is an Auror. Both really talented. I’m surprised he didn’t go into the family business.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

“Well, I think he’s going to be great in his field. He exceeded the Outstandings grade on his Herbology NEWT,” Harry said, with a proud smile though he hadn’t even known Neville at the time. Both James and Sirius looked suitably impressed. “He’s going into Potions and Plants Poisonings.”

“Under Snivellus?” James demanded, his lips curling in disgust.

Harry actually laughed at the terrible nickname. “Yeah. You were right. He’s an arse. Merlin, I hate him. I don’t really work with him a lot, thank Merlin. But, Neville does. He was such a *dick* to him on the first day.”

“Not surprising. Snape is the most unpleasant arse that I’ve ever met in my life. Can’t understand how he’s friends with Lily,” Sirius muttered under his breath.

If either James or Sirius noticed Harry flinch at his mother’s name, they were kind enough not to mention it. Harry cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Your sister mentioned you wrote her back,” James said and Harry’s lips twitched into a smile as he thought about his gossipy little sister. She wasn’t really that little either but, still.

“Yeah, I did. I miss her,” Harry said, softly.

James hummed. “You should come home for Christmas, then. You haven’t been home for Christmas in...years, I think,” James said, and he sounded sad about it. Sadder than Harry had ever thought he’d be about the matter.

“I...it’s still only October. I’ll think about it. I’ll see what my housemates are doing,” Harry allowed.

“That’s all I ask,” James murmured. “You ready to order?”

Even as he asked, he waved down the waitress. She jotted down their orders with a quill and dashed off. Harry rocked back and forth in his seat, unsure of where it was safe to look. He had never felt so incredibly nervous in front of his family before.

“How’s working with Riddle?” Sirius asked.

Harry fought hard to keep his blush from overwhelming him.

"Uh...er...he's fine. Arrogant. Obnoxious. Insistent," Harry muttered, growing more and more irritated as he thought about Tom Riddle. He looked up, sheepish when he saw how amused his dad and godfather were. "But, I don't actually train with him that often. I'm McGonagall's trainee."

“Minerva! Merlin, Minerva trained Snape and Lily too, didn’t she?” Sirius asked, ignoring Harry’s flinch again. This time Harry didn’t think he was being kind. He just didn’t seem to notice. “Do they tell stories about the two of them? I wonder.”

“We don’t really talk about Mum at work,” Harry said, his voice cold.

Sirius’ eyes widened and he swallowed, finally *noticing*.

“Your mum has been writing you, you know. Are you going to respond to her?” James asked, quietly.

And there it was.

“Look. I don’t fucking know, okay?” Harry snarled, looking up at the two of them. “I have nothing to say to her.”

There was a long moment between the three of them, interrupted by the sudden appearance of their food. Harry dug into his bangers and mash with gusto, demolishing it with a fork and knife. He went about it methodically, like a procedure with his wand and athame. He pretended that he couldn’t feel their eyes on him.

“She wants to know you. About you. Your life,” James said, hesitantly.

He hadn’t touched his sandwich. Harry slammed his knife and fork down.

“Don’t pretend you…don’t pretend that I don’t have a reason. To not want to talk to her,” Harry said. He didn’t bother checking the time. “I have to go. I have work.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry wrestled himself into his hunter green robes and practically threw himself at McGonagall’s feet the moment he arrived at the hospital.

“Potter,” she drawled.

"Reporting for duty, Healer McGonagall!" Harry said, saluting her. McGonagall rolled her eyes but didn't say anything particularly scathing so he took it as a win. "What am I doing today? Brewing? Pharmacy? Paperwork?"

“None of the above. You’ve been requested,” McGonagall sighed.

Harry’s heart dropped into his belly. “By...not by Riddle? Please, not by Riddle,” Harry whispered to himself and McGonagall’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I thought you’d enjoy working with Healer Riddle, seeing as your introduction to the program was an internal procedure with him. Is there a problem?” McGonagall asked, taking a step closer. Harry shivered under her gaze; it was like she could stare into his soul, and his soul was not something for public consumption.

“Um. No. I just...don’t feel like doing Spell Damage work today,” Harry squeaked.

McGonagall stared at him and rolled her eyes. Harry knew his lie was weak, but he wasn't going to say *shit* to his teacher.

"Good. Because you've been called up to the Mind Healing Ward. Report to the Head Healer. He has work for you," McGonagall said before leaving, a clear dismissal.

Harry stared at her, slack-jawed.

Albus Dumbledore had requested to work with *him.*

The Head Healer of St. Mungo's was legendary in his field. Mind Healing was one of the most mysterious parts of the Healing arts. It was notoriously difficult, requiring a balanced mind, and control that few possessed. One had to be well-versed in both Occlumency and Legilimency, and there was always a certain quality that one had to possess.

Of course, that meant Harry was *not* meant for that field in the least.

He was a human traffic accident.

"A-are you sure?" Harry called after her.

McGonagall paused, looking over her shoulder. "Potter, I have patients to check up on. *Yes*, I'm sure," she barked.

Harry let out a deep breath that he hadn't even known he was holding, in order to center himself. He turned back to the lifts and then froze when he saw a familiar pair of shoulders. Riddle was talking to someone—a girl that was nearly two feet shorter with long blonde hair that fell to her waist. Her lime green robes were quite shocking in comparison to the neon purple barrettes in her hair.

As if sensing him, Riddle began to turn away from his conversation. Harry turned on his heel immediately and knew that he would much rather take the stairs all the way up to the Mind Healing floor than wait in another lift with Riddle.

By the time he reached the top, Harry was so out of breath, his entire face was red. He wheezed, his chest rebelling against him. Harry doubled over, attempting to catch his breath, before he collected himself, standing up straight. He smoothed his hands over his robes, and strode forward through the hall and turned into the Head Healer's office.

"Healer Dumbledore, you requested me?" Harry asked.

Albus Dumbledore's office was as eccentric and extravagant as the man himself. There were shelves upon shelves, some crooked, piled upon with little silver instruments and knick-knacks. Books were piled up on the floor, overflowing from the stuffed bookshelves. It smelled like lemon drops and freshly brewed tea, and the whole of it made it hard for Harry not to smile.

"Ah, come in, my boy," Dumbledore said, cheerfully. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Harry faltered at the man's question, slowly nodding as he went to sit in the chair before the desk. It was overstuffed and soft, and Harry practically sank into it.

"Sure. But, I thought we were doing Mind Healing today?" Harry said as a question. He leaned forward in his seat. "Splash of milk, no sugar."

Dumbledore's smile widened and he waved his wand. Harry's eyebrows rose as the teapot and milk did Dumbledore's bidding, falling into order. The teacup scuttled towards Harry before settling. Harry took a sip and grinned in satisfaction.

"Today will be an observation and education day," Dumbledore said. "I'm afraid that I can't allow you to engage in any Healing with any of the patients until I evaluate your Mind magical skills."

Harry swallowed.

"I guess it's best to tell you now that I'm not very good at Occlumency or Legilimency. My dad tried to teach me Occlumency, but I'm too...volatile," Harry admitted and Dumbledore's smile widened as if he were charmed by the idea.

"As all youth are. But, this is a skill as any other skill that one cultivates during their Healing education. We will raise you up above inadequacy, this I promise. Tell me, my boy, how are you enjoying the program?" Dumbledore asked.

And Harry wondered why the man was asking. He didn't seem to be going out of his way to ask the other trainees. So, that meant it definitely had something to do with Lily. His mood began to sour.

"Does it matter?" Harry asked, as a knee-jerk reaction. He cringed. "I'm sorry. I'm...I'm unnaturally defensive."

Dumbledore didn't seem upset. "That's quite understandable with your mother being who she is."

Harry paused.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"I'm sure you wonder why I ask this of you specifically. And I would be remiss not to acknowledge that I ask this of you because you are Lily's son. But, I do not think you quite understand my reasoning entirely. Your mother is a prominent figure in this hospital and the Healing world at large. I ask about your participation in the program because I would hate it if her shadow made it difficult for the Healers here to see you," Dumbledore said, immediately.

Harry swallowed, fighting the smile that was attempting to work its way across his face. He took a sip of his tea. As he figured out what he was going to say, he ended up gulping down his tea, scalding his tongue.

“It’s...it’s going good,” Harry allowed. Dumbledore looked at him in such a way that it made Harry’s lips curl into a wide grin. “It’s better than good. It’s amazing, sir. I...my first day, I assisted in an internal procedure. And I felt…”

“Healing is a magic beyond all others,” Dumbledore allowed.

Harry found himself nodding eagerly.

“It really is,” Harry said, softly.

Dumbledore hummed. “Good. Now that we’ve had this lovely conversation, I’m afraid the time for work begins, especially if we’re to take part in the festivities,” Dumbledore said, cheerfully.

Harry blinked. "What?"

Dumbledore didn't seem to have heard him, instead bustling around his office, grabbing seemingly random pieces of parchment, stacking them together. Harry blinked rapidly as he stared down at the bright yellow silk slippers peeking out from under the hem of the man's robes. Dumbledore was *definitely* mad.

“Come, young Harry. We shall do rounds,” Dumbledore said, passing him the stack of parchments and striding towards the door. Harry stayed frozen in his seat for only another second before he hurried after the man, holding the parchment tight to his chest. “Be alert. Take notes. I’ll be very clear about the treatment for each. You seemed quite aware of afflictions of the mind last time we spoke.”

“I am. At least, as much as I can be. We learned about it, some, in school,” Harry stammered.

Dumbledore glanced back, regarding him over his half-moon lenses. “Good. I’d advise you to brush up on your studies. I’d like to keep you on my service for another two weeks. We’ll get your Occlumency to a passable level. It’s a helpful tool for *all* wizards.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, following the man to the Janus Thickey Ward.

Harry had never considered Mind Healing and he still wasn’t—not really. But, he was being taught by *Albus Dumbledore.*

“And after rounds, I’ll need you down on the E&T floor, searching for possible Mind patients.”

Harry’s excitement fell. So, Dumbledore needed a *grunt*. Great.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry huffed, already exhausted, and barely halfway through his shift. He looked through the next patient file. This one looked promising. Dennis Aldermaston, age 24, and seemed to be suffering from a rather stubborn Confundus Charm.

Dennis Aldermaston was definitely confused about something as he wandered around, bumping into random beds and matrons. A young matron tried to wrestle him back into bed, but he seemed to be arguing with her, convinced that he was actually a famous Quidditch player.

Harry's lips quirked as the man snarled, "Do you know who I *am*?"

The matron threw up her hands, clearly exasperated. She took a step back, shaking her head.

"What do I even do with him? He's been at it for twenty minutes," she sighed, exhaustion rife through her face.

"Hi, Matron. I've got this. I'll calm him down. Distract him. I'm going to run a diagnostics spell, see what I can find out. Then, you hit him with a stasis charm and then we can transfer him upstairs. Healer Dumbledore was looking for some mind patients and it seems like I've found an interesting one," Harry said, observing his charts and paperwork while looking at the patient.

The Confundus Charm wasn't performing like a typical Confundus Charm. He seemed to be genuinely convinced that he was a Quidditch player.

"Sure," the matron sighed, pulling her wand.

"Hello, Mister Aldermaston. It's such a pleasure to meet you," Harry said, affecting an awe-inspired look. His voice swooped higher and the man turned on him, suddenly looking more dazed than before.

"Well, look at you," Aldermaston drawled. He shot a sour look at the matron. "At least *someone* knows who I am."

"Sure, Mister Aldermaston," the matron muttered.

Harry swallowed his snickers as he took a step forward. "Of course, I know who you *are*. I'm Healer Potter, and you're at St. Mungo's. It looks like you took a Bludger to the head, sir. If you'll just take a seat," Harry said as pleasantly as he could.

"I will do anything you want me to," Aldermaston drawled. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Aldermaston settled on the gurney and laid back on it, stretching his arms over his head. He squirmed, a frown furrowing his brow. "Can you adjust my pillow? I'm uncomfortable."

Harry's teeth clenched and he glanced back at the matron. The matron rolled her eyes.

"Sure, Mister Aldermaston," Harry said as pleasantly as he possible. He moved forward, leaning down to adjust the man's pillow when suddenly a hand was pressed against the back of his head and the patient was kissing him.

Harry grunted as he felt a slobbering tongue swipe at his teeth and he jerked back, stumbling. Aldermaston grinned up at him, winking.

The matron's mouth fell open. "What the—"

"Fuck this," Harry growled, pulling his wand. "*Akinisía.*"

Aldermaston's eyes rolled into the back of his head as Harry put him into a rather forceful stasis.

"I'll...transport him upstairs," the matron decided, waving her wand and already the gurney was floating away.

Harry gagged, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand and silently debated the merits of casting an *Aguamenti* straight into his mouth. Fucking people didn't know what *fucking* boundaries were. What an asshole.

And then, he felt him. *Looming.*

Harry groaned, turning around to face Riddle.

"You kiss patients now?" Riddle asked, his face warring between irritation and amusement

Harry flushed but, successfully, blew him off, rolling his eyes.

"What are you? Jealous?" Harry challenged, turning away from him and marking the patient down for evaluation by the Mind Healers. He was clearly hit by a Confundus Charm otherwise he wouldn't have done something like that.

Harry paused. Re-evaluated.

Well, *some* people might have done that. He didn't really know the man.

"I don't get jealous," Riddle protested.

Harry's lips twitched. The man sounded jealous.

"We had sex. Once."

"And we kissed in a lift," Riddle retorted.

Harry huffed, rolling his eyes as he pressed his parchment and quill tight to his chest as he regarded the man, his eyes narrowed. "It wasn't that good, you know," Harry muttered.

Liar.

"Then, let me prove that it can be. Get dinner with me. Or a drink. Get a drink with me, Harry," Riddle said, taking a step closer. Harry's breath caught in his throat as Riddle was suddenly towering over him, looking down at him with those mesmerizing burgundy eyes.

"I...no. You're my boss," Harry said, helplessly.

Riddle raised an eyebrow. “I have it on good authority that you like having someone bossy in your bed.”

Harry swallowed and back around, pressing his parchments to his face in an attempt to hide the violent flush of blood to his cheeks. Riddle laughed softly, and even in his laughter sent a shudder of arousal down Harry’s spine along with a healthy sense of outrage. Harry turned back around, his green eyes narrowed.

“You think you’re charming,” Harry snapped.

“Oh, sweetheart, I know I’m charming,” Riddle retorted.

Harry swallowed. *Sweetheart*. Oh, he liked the sound of that. It was condescending and such an asshole thing to say, but Harry liked it.

Sweetheart.

“You’re not, you know,” Harry said as confidently as he could, forcing his embarrassment away. “You think you are but you’re not. You think you’re going to wear me down because you, what? Get off on the chase? You like to play games, Healer Riddle?”

Riddle raised an eyebrow, his smile slowly fading away. He took a step closer, looming over Harry. Harry was starting not to mind the man’s looming.

“I don’t play games, Harry Potter. And it’s not the chase. I like you,” Riddle said, softly, reaching up and letting his hand hover in the air. “You’re beautiful, you’re rude, and you’re talented.”

“Oh, I’m talented?” Harry asked.

Fuck, he was flirting back.

“Talent turns me on,” Riddle drawled. “It turns you on too. I can tell.”

“It does,” Harry allowed. He took a step back, his eyes narrowing. “But, I’m still not going out with you.”

Riddle let his hand drop, and his lips curled into a smirk. “You say that now.”

He walked away as if their interaction hadn’t ever happened. Harry bit his bottom lip, fighting away his smile.

He grinned anyway.

DIAGNOSIS

“Okay. How many people are on the list?” Hermione asked, looking over Ron’s shoulder. Her eyes narrowed at the chicken scratch and she scoffed. “How can you do McGonagall’s post-procedure paperwork with handwriting like *this*?”

“I do drafts. Duh,” Ron said, sticking out his mashed potatoes covered tongue. Hermione made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat as she snatched the parchment and quill, and began to go over the list.

“Okay. You’ve invited half the hospital. *Really,* Ron? Really?” Hermione demanded.

Ron shrugged. “People kept coming up to me and asking. And it’s not like Grimmauld Place is small. We’ve got that little back garden too,” Ron pointed out. He reached out to take one of Hermione’s chips, but she sent a quick Stinging Charm that made him cry out and wince.

Hermione rolled her eyes and continued to go through the list. Ron had invited almost every department with the exception of the Artifact Accidenters, though that no surprise. Ron had been forced to work with them multiple times already, and he’d said they were all freaks.

“We don’t have enough alcohol for that many people,” Neville said as he wandered over, peering over Hermione’s shoulder. He went around the table and set down his food tray, staring at his two housemates. “We’ve only got three cases of Butterbeer in the house.”

“Harry has a bottle of Firewhiskey,” Ron supplied unhelpfully.

“Well…half a bottle of Firewhiskey,” Hermione corrected. The three exchanged long meaningful looks. None of them wanted to say it, but they all understood.

Harry wasn’t an alcoholic in the least, but he was a little fond of Firewhiskey.

"Okay. What if I circulate a bring your own alcohol policy?" Neville asked. He leaned forward, a curious look on his face. "The matrons can bring Gigglewater. Spell Damage brings Firewhiskey. Everyone else brings more Butterbeer and maybe some wizard's brew."

“Sounds like a plan. We can get that out word of mouth,” Hermione decided.

Neville hesitated. “Does Harry know how big this is?”

“I mean...if you want to tell him,” Ron said, unhelpfully gesturing to the approaching man.

Harry looked caught between giddiness and outrage. He fell into the seat next to Neville, letting his head fall on the man’s shoulder. Neville’s cheeks pinked up, but Harry didn’t even seem to notice. He leaned forward over the table, grabbing half of Hermione’s sandwich.

“What’s up?” Hermione asked, curiously.

“Hey! How come he can eat half of your sandwich, but I can’t have *one* chip?” Ron demanded.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Because I *like* him,” Hermione said. She turned back to Harry, raising a single eyebrow.

“Okay, so I came to work late—”

“Oh, yeah, how was lunch with your godfather and dad?” Neville asked curiously.

Harry rolled his eyes. “They try. I promised I’d think about spending Christmas with them. Definitely besides the point. As I was saying, I came to work late, so I couldn’t tell you all, but I worked with Albus Dumbledore today!”

Hermione gaped and Ron’s mouth unhinged, showing off the bits of food in his mouth. Harry’s nose wrinkled. Ron swallowed his food, quickly washing it down with pumpkin juice.

“You’re joking! How was it? What did you do?” Ron asked.

“Not much, right? I mean...are you skilled at Legilimency or Occlumency? Mind magic is such delicate work. It takes *years*,” Hermione murmured, her eyes bright with wonder at all of the possibilities. She brushed a bushy piece of hair down, patting it back into her bun.

“Well, really, I took notes. I’ll be on his service for the next two weeks! He wants to teach me passable Occlumency. He’s so cool. Definitely mad, but also *very* cool,” Harry said with a grin.

"That can't be what's got you so happy though. Are you excited about the party?" Ron asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. “For a housewarming? Not really.”

The three housemates exchanged nervous looks.

“Well, out with it, Harry,” Hermione said, pushing her unfinished plate of chips towards Harry. She ignored Ron’s longing look.

Harry bit his bottom lip. “Don’t react—”

“What *now*, Harry?” Hermione demanded, her eyes suddenly blazing.

“I said don’t react!” Harry whined.

“Don’t react to what?” Neville asked curiously.

Hermione shook her head, only having eyes for Harry. “What did you *do*?”

“I didn’t do anything. Just...just he’s charming. So, so charming,” Harry sighed, a faraway look entering his eyes. Neville looked away, shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

“Are you going to share with the class?” Ron snapped, a little put out.

Hermione and Harry seemed to realize where they were.

“Uh...later, Hermione,” Harry muttered. Hermione nodded once, though she still appeared unhappy. Ron and Neville pursed their lips, irritated. “Now, tell me about *your* days.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione grumbled under her breath as she went through her notes again. She turned back to the potion and furrowed her brow as she gradually added the last ingredient: aconite. Hermione shielded her eyes with one hand, as she went to wave her wand. She prepared for the explosion and let out a gasp of relief when a faint blue smoke floated from the potion.

She let out a long sigh and shook her head.

"*Tempus*," she murmured.

It was only nine. Sure, she would be late to her own party, but she was *reasonably* sure that Ron and Neville could handle it. Hermione packed up her books and left the potion lab after casting a stasis charm over her potion. As she walked up the stairs, she went through all of her notes, double checking her work.

When she entered the Healer trainee room, she grinned.

"You waited for me?" Hermione asked, grinning at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes, looking away. "No. I just...didn't want to leave yet," Harry grumbled.

Hermione snorted. "You're not as much of a curmudgeon as you pretend to be, Harry Potter. Now, tell me about what I'm not supposed to react to," she said as she stowed her books in her cupboard and began to unbutton her robes and shouldering them off, leaving her only in a pair of tight trousers and her bra.

She paused looking at herself in the mirror, pinching at the soft bit of flesh around her middle. Hermione rolled her eyes and turned back to her cupboard.

"He asked me on a date again. And he said it's not a game. Hermione, I...I would like to believe him," Harry said hesitantly.

Hermione turned on her friend immediately, her eyes blazing as she pulled her t-shirt over her head.

"No, Harry. He's charming, but you have to think big picture. This could *ruin* your career," Hermione said insistently. She paused, taking her hair out of the bun and shaking it out, letting it frizz out wildly around her head, the curls bouncing every which way. She glanced in the mirror again and nodded approvingly.

"I still have so much to prove," Harry murmured to himself. He shook himself, looking back over at Hermione, crossing his arms. "You look good for a housewarming party."

"So do you," Hermione retorted, gesturing to his too-tight jeans with tears and rips in the thighs and knees and the oversized sweater that he liked to wear to show off his collarbones.

“Should we grab snacks before we go home? Do you think Ron and Neville bought snacks?” he asked as they walked towards the Apparation spot together. Hermione’s brow slowly furrowed.

“Harry...how much do you know about this party?” she asked.

"Trainees, right? Wait...you guys didn't invite Smith, did you? I hate that guy," Harry grumbled.

Hermione swallowed. “Har—”

But, he was gone with a crack. Hermione cursed under her breath and followed him. She Disapparated and winced as she felt like she was being compressed into a straw and then pushed back out again on the front step of Grimmauld Place.

The door was open and the loud, thumping music was pouring out onto the street.

Hermione ran up the steps and inside, shutting the door behind her. She swallowed as she stood at Harry’s side, observing the monster that she had helped to create.

There were people everywhere. Up the stairs, in the hallways leading to the kitchen, to the two parlors and the living room. Everyone was talking over everyone else, barely hearing the music. There were two matrons giggling raucously as they drank their Gigglewater, and resisted being flirted with by a Spell Damage specialist that Hermione was *sure* wasn’t a trainee.

“Hermione. Who are all of these people in my *house*?” Harry roared, but his voice was lost in the din of all the noise. He seemed to be shouting something more, probably curse, but Hermione had to strain to hear him. “You know what! Forget it! Where’s the Firewhiskey?”

He’s stormed away, his cheek red with fury.

Hermione swallowed and then decided that she would feel bad about it later. Better to beg for forgiveness than ask permission. It was something that she was learning quickly, especially if she wanted to stay ahead of the game at St. Mungo’s.

“Hello, would you like a bottle of Butterbeer?”

Hermione blinked down at the sweet-looking young woman. She was quite short with long dirty blonde hair that flowed to her waist in waves. She possessed the largest set of eyes that Hermione had ever seen outside of a house elf, and she had a string of Butterbeer caps around her neck. She held out the bottle with a hopeful look on her face.

“Um. Sure. This is my house,” Hermione said, taking the open bottle. She didn’t drink it. “I’m Hermione Granger, Healer trainee. I haven’t seen you in the Healer trainee room.”

"That's because I'm not a trainee, silly," the girl laughed, taking a long sip of her beer. She gave a tiny belch but made no move to excuse herself. "I'm Luna Lovegood, Head of the Children's Ward! I specialize in Magical Bugs and Maladies."

Hermione's eyes widened and she took a long drag of her Butterbeer. "You look *twelve*," she blurted out and then flushed. "Wait, no. Sorry. I'll be on your service soon and I don't want you to hold that against me."

Luna Lovegood's smile widened broadly, to the point that Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

"That's alright," Luna said, dreamily. "I'm really not that much older than you. But, that's a story for another time. I should go find Albus."

Hermione blinked.

"Wait. Dumbledore is here?" Hermione demanded.

Luna nodded, eagerly. "And all the other Department Heads. We wouldn't miss out on a *party*!" Luna giggled and she was off, disappearing into the crowd.

Hermione shivered, thrown by the strangest encounter of her life. And then it hit her. Her *bosses* were at her house. At her party. They were seeing their entire staff rage like they were a bunch of schoolchildren or randy teenagers. Hermione swallowed when a couple slammed against the wall next to her, furiously snogging, attempting to strip one another right there in the open. Hermione slowly traded the girl's Gigglewater for her Butterbeer. The snogging couple didn't miss a beat.

Hermione was definitely going to need something stronger.

She pushed through the crowd, taking a sip of the *terribly* sweet liquid. Then she chugged it, pushing through towards the kitchen. She stumbled into the kitchen and set her nearly empty bottle down on the counter. There was a much smaller group in the kitchen, all talking rather loudly to each other.

She paused. "Wait. You aren't Healers," she accused, raising her finger.

The group looked up and glanced at her. They looked her over, judgmentally. One of them laughed, coolly.

"Yeah. It's because we're junior Aurors. *Duh*," she drawled before turning back to her little group.

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. *What the fuck.*

She finished off her Gigglewater in one go, chugging it, and promptly let out a long peal of laughter. One of the junior Aurors looked up, interested. She barely noticed him coming her way as she laughed it all out, hiccuping at the end.

"You've got a really cute laugh," the man said.

Hermione jumped, her eyes wide. "Um. Me?" she asked.

The man's smile widened. "Yeah, you."

Hermione's lips curled into a grin and she looked him over. He was quite tall with a thicket of luscious blonde hair atop his head, perfectly coiffed. He had that smile; that ‘I know I'm great smile'. Hermione dubbed it an ‘uppity Auror smile' in her head. Though she'd only been at St. Mungo's for a month, she already knew how some Aurors could be up their arse about their job as if it were more important than hers.

“I’m Hermione Granger,” she said with a grin, holding out her hand. “I live here.”

The man took her hand and brought it to his lips. Hermione smothered a snort with her other hand.

"I'm Cormac McLaggen. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger."

DIAGNOSIS

Ron had not expected this. Not in the least.

He had thought that a few people would show up here and there, just coming through before proceeding to the pubs. After all, it was a Saturday night, but a lot of people would have a shift tomorrow. Except, it seemed like *everyone* that worked at the hospital was in his house, and then some. Everywhere he turned, Ron saw St. Mungo’s employees, junior Aurors, and a host of Ministry interns that he had *no* idea about.

“Neville...this is fucked. This is so fucking fucked. Harry’s going to bludgeon us with a Beaters bat,” Ron hissed. He turned, searching for Neville and he scoffed when he saw the other man pressed into a corner by a rather insistent Hannah Abbott.

They weren’t snogging just yet. Hannah was saying something excitedly to him and Neville just looked sort of overwhelmed, looking over Ron’s head, helplessly. Ron saluted him and sighed, turning around and clutching his wizard’s brew tighter to his chest. Someone should get some, he decided, if it wasn’t going to be him.

Ron cursed under his breath as he began to patrol around the party, waving his wand to keep certain doors locked. It wouldn’t do for Harry to get home to two people hooking up in his bed. That just wasn’t on and Ron didn’t really want to be evicted when he’d *just* finally moved out of his parents' house. He couldn't take any more of his mum's fussing.

Ron whipped around as a trio of girls scurried past, giggling and clutching a bottle of wizard’s brew tight between the three of them. Ron pulled his wand.

“*Accio* bottle!” Ron snarled. The ale ripped itself right out of their hands landing clumsily in his free hand. He turned on the three girls. “Hey, how old are you three?”

“Seventeen,” snapped the boldest of them. “I’m Romilda Vane.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “Where are you from?”

Romilda Vane faltered. “E-excuse me?”

“What department?” Ron challenged, taking a step closer to them. The other two girls fought to get behind Romilda, whispering to each other frantically.

“U-um...Artifact Accidents?” Romilda said, slowly.

Ron scoffed. “Ha! You’re Hogwarts students, aren’t you? We didn’t invite any Accidenters because they’re off. So, tell me...should I give the Headmaster a firecall or will you three get out of my house of your own free will?” Ron demanded.

Romilda’s eyes narrowed. “At least give me back my brew,” Romilda demanded.

Ron scoffed. “Yeah, right. I’m not giving some underage girl any alcohol. Now, get out before I have a few junior Aurors arrest you for underage Apparating or however you got here. You know where the door is,” Ron challenged. His eyes narrowed.

“You heard the man.”

Ron’s eyes widened and he glanced at the woman that had joined his side. She was a pretty woman with short dark hair and a round face. Her arms were crossed under her rather ample breasts. Ron slowly looked her up and down. Well, *damn.*

“Yeah, yeah, we’re going,” Romilda muttered, shooting Ron an evil look. She stuck out her tongue and gave him the finger.

Ron returned it wholeheartedly and took a swig of her brew just to be an arsehole.

The woman that had joined him laughed, wildly. Ron turned to her, a little dazed like he'd been struck over the head.

“Hi. I’m Ron Weasley,” Ron said with a grin.

The woman looked up at him with sparkling eyes. “I’m Emmeline Vance. Creature-Induced Injuries. Nice going there. Real responsible.”

“Thanks. I try to set a good example for our future,” Ron said with a grin.

“Good on you. I’m going to get more Gigglewater. You should come find me later,” she said. Emmeline winked at him, disappearing down the hallway before Ron could even get another word out.

Ron opened and closed his mouth like a fish, dumbstruck. He watched the way her hips swayed as she moved. What a woman.

“Weasley!”

Ron paled at the familiar voice. Slowly, he turned to face his *bosses.*

Dumbledore grinned at him, waving happily, standing between McGonagall and Snape. Snape's lips curled into a sneer as he finished his glass of what appeared to be Muggle bourbon.

"Um...yes...sir?" Ron squeaked.

"Do you have any more bourbon? And who are these hooligans in this house?" Snape demanded, his eyes narrowed.

"I don't really—"

"This party is *excellent,* Mister Weasley!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. As if on cue, someone screamed and there was the sound of shattering glass followed by a large roar of laughter. "Really quite entertaining. I don't think I've had this much fun in decades."

"I'm glad to hear that, Healer Dumbledore. I just...I'm going to…" Ron turned on his heel, ready to flee. He froze when he was met with a much shorter—though far fiercer—man, with a Firewhiskey bottle clenched tight in his fist. "Harry!"

"Who the *fuck* are all these people in my house, Ron?" Harry snarled.

"What language," McGonagall tutted.

Harry's eyes widened when he realized who the three people behind Ron were. He pinched the bridge of his nose and threw his hand up.

"You know what...I'm not dealing with this. I'm just *not*. Ron, you clear this out. I want them *all* gone in the next twenty minute or so help me, Merlin, I will *kill* you," Harry threatened. He glanced at his three bosses again, opened his mouth and then shut it when he couldn't think of anything to say.

Instead, he took another swig of his Firewhiskey and stormed back down the stairs.

"Hey!"

"Bugger off!" Harry roared to the man he had just pushed as he stormed down the steps and turned down one of the more deserted hallways. He pushed through the backdoor into the freezing back garden.

Harry didn't hate parties. He actually rather enjoyed it. It gave him an excuse to drink and dance like a loon. He did *not* like having a party sprung on him in his own home. He did not like having an enormous party in his house after a long day at work, with mostly people he didn't know. He also did not want to party with people that he worked for. Suddenly, Harry was reminded of Dumbledore's reference to 'festivities'.

Wow. Fuck his housemates.

Harry sighed, closing his eyes as the music traveled outside and he took another sip of his Firewhiskey. Slowly, he moved his hips to the sound of the music, gyrating to the heavy bass.

He let out a quiet laugh as he dipped low, rolling his hips in time. He punctuated with another swing from his bottle.

“Damn, Harry. If I knew you could move like that...well, I would’ve put you in a more challenging position the last time.”

Harry's eyes flashed open. He stared at the man leaning against the fence, an empty bottle of Firewhiskey hanging from his hand. Riddle looked unfairly attractive in a pair of black trousers that clung to his long, muscular legs, and a button-down that showed off his long neck and just the top of his chest. Harry wanted to lick him.

“How are you *here*? Why?” Harry whined, throwing his hand in the air. He paused in his outrage to take a swig of his Firewhiskey.

“It was all over the hospital,” Riddle drawled, snatching the bottle from Harry’s hand. He collapsed on the little garden bench, leaning back in his seat as he took a long pull and then passed it back to the younger man. “Thanks for not inviting me by the way. That felt good.”

“They said it was a housewarming party! I thought it was just gonna be, like, other trainees, but I saw Dumbledore and McGonagall and *Snape*. If my godfather found out, he'd have an aneurysm," Harry whined, throwing his head back against the back of the chair. Slowly, he slumped over, his head falling against Riddle's shoulder.

Riddle lifted his hand, pressing his fingers into Harry’s hair, slowly massaging his scalp. Harry let out a little moan.

“Well...you know how to fix that,” Riddle allowed. He scoffed as they looked back at raging party. They could see the mass of people through the windows, could hear the crashing of pot and plates and the screaming laughter. “I can’t believe you turned me down for *this. This* and a bottle of Firewhiskey.”

Harry slowly set his Firewhiskey to the side, rolling his head up to look at Riddle. Riddle was looking down at him with those dark burgundy eyes. Harry let out a soft whimper when Riddle’s fingers tightened in his hair, tugging lightly.

“I wish I didn’t,” Harry whispered, swallowing around the sudden knot in his throat.

“Hmm, you wish you didn’t?” Riddle rasped, lowering his face to Harry’s until their lips were only centimeters apart.

“You said no games...Tom,” Harry murmured, raising a hand to cup Riddle’s jaw. “I don’t like games.”

“Good.”

And then, Riddle’s hand fell to Harry’s thigh and he pulled until Harry was straddling his lap. Harry slung one arm over Riddle’s shoulder and moaned as the man’s hands roamed up the back of thighs to grab at his arse, yanking him down until their groins were pressed together.

They never broke eye contact as Harry slowly began to rock in Riddle's lap to the sound of the thumping bass.

Harry pressed his forehead to Riddle's and he let out a shuddering moan as their cocks pressed against one another. He let his head fall against Riddle's shoulder and raked his fingers down Riddle's back, grinding down hard. Riddle's hands tightened on his arse, slowly guiding him back and forth.

"Fuck, you're so sexy. Merlin…" Riddle whispered. He reached up and yanked Harry's head back by his hair, licking a line up from Harry's exposed collarbone to his jaw. He leaned forward, biting hard at Harry's bottom lip and pulled, watching it redden.

His cock twitched against Harry's and Harry mewled again.

"I want you to fuck me. Need you to fuck me against a wall," Harry gasped. Riddle groaned as he nipped at the column of Harry's neck, sucking a mark into the soft pale skin. "Press me into a mattress and fuck me so hard I can't walk. Don't you want me?"

"Fuck, I want you. You want to show me how good you can be?" Riddle hissed as purple blossomed in the shape of his mouth. Harry keened softly as Riddle pressed a thumb to the fresh hickey. "I want to make you *scream*."

"How crude."

The two froze. Harry's face turned ashen at the voice. Slowly, he slid to the side and turned to look at Minerva McGonagall.

Her lips were pressed tight, pale in her fury. She glared at Riddle with so much rage that Harry was terrified that she was going to pull her wand on him immediately. But, just as fast as her rage had appeared, it was gone again, replaced with severe disapproval with a healthy dose of apathy.

"Minerva," Riddle drawled like he wasn't currently tenting his *trousers*.

"H-Healer McGonagall, it wasn't...I was…" Harry stammered, looking down at his cock. He had been so hard that it had hurt just moments ago. Now, it was like all of the blood had rushed to his heart, making it beat double-time.

"Don't mind me. It's not like there aren't a hundred people currently in your home, Potter, waiting to eavesdrop. If you'll excuse me," McGonagall hissed.

She Disapparated on the spot and Harry let out a breath that he didn't know he was holding.

"Harry."

"What?" Harry whispered, still staring at the spot McGonagall had been in.

"I still want to fuck you. Let me help you forget," Riddle purred, licking the shell of his ear. Harry shivered under his ministrations, but still, he didn't look away.

“Forget what?”

“*Everything*.”

Harry keened and slowly he nodded. "Help me forget."

Chapter End Notes

Welp. I can't believe I updated Cinders and Diagnosis in one night, but I did. So, here it is. Probably won't update for a couple more weeks. I have finals coming up after Thanksgiving, but I'll try my best!

Signing off!

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He turned in his bed, burying closer to his pillows even as light filtered through his blinds. Harry groaned as sleep was chased away by the creeping light. His moan of displeasure turned into a whimper of content as he felt fingers run through his hair, rubbing at his scalp. Those fingers felt so familiar. So did the arm wrapped around him, keeping him pressed tight against a long hard body.

Harry blinked himself awake and squinted to make out burgundy eyes staring down at him.

“You’re so creepy,” Harry slurred. “Stop watching me sleep, Riddle.”

“I thought I told you. It’s Tom,” the man said. “Especially in bed.”

Harry whined as Tom rolled him onto his back. Harry’s legs spread unconsciously and Tom rolled his hips against him, their bare cocks rubbing against one another. Harry’s dick twitched with interest and he mewled, hooking one leg over Tom’s. Tom leaned down to brush his lips against Harry’s before switching directions, peppering his face with kisses.

“You’re gorgeous,” Tom whispered, staring down at him.

Harry’s lips parted and he took a deep shuddering breath.

“Shut up,” Harry snapped and he tugged Tom down, pressing their lips together.

He ignored the terrible morning breath—on both their parts—in favor of licking at Tom’s bottom lip, sucking on it greedily. He devoured the man on top of him because that was what Harry did. Harry sucked the people around him dry. Tom pulled back, staring down at him with narrowed eyes.

“You’re so fucked up,” he murmured.

Harry scoffed. “You like that though.”

“I like that you’re a rude brat,” Tom snapped. “There’s a difference.”

He leaned down to kiss Harry again but Harry turned his head.

"No...get up. I have to go to work," Harry murmured though he leaned up for a kiss anyway. Tom licked his lips but didn't deepen the kiss again, instead pulling back.

He slipped from the bed and Harry reached for his glasses, intent on admiring him. Tom looked good, naked and ruffled. His strong back was definitely a turn-on and Harry’s eyes trailed down to his arse, those well-sculpted thighs. The man pulled up his trousers and

picked up his button-down from the floor. Tom grabbed his wand, waving it and his shirt buttoned itself

"Do you have a comb?" Tom asked. He paused as he looked at Harry and snorted. "Why am I even asking?"

Promptly, he walked towards the adjoining master bathroom. Harry scoffed, offended and stood from his bed, wrapping himself in his sheet.

“Oi! What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry demanded from the doorway. Tom rolled his eyes, already waving his wand and conjuring a comb into existence. The man looked at himself in the mirror, beginning to work the plastic teeth through his hair.

“You look perpetually fucked out, sweetheart. Don’t worry. It’s sexy,” Tom said, almost condescendingly.

Harry stuck up his middle finger as he entered the bathroom and slid up on the countertop, right next to Tom. He leaned back against the wall, swinging his legs as he watched Tom do his hair. The man's neck was peppered with bruises that trailed down his chest. Harry had matching bruises on the inside of his thighs. Tom slid his conjured comb through his hair.

“McGonagall saw us,” Harry murmured, “And we didn’t cast a Silencing Charm.”

“You *are* rather loud,” Tom said, consideringly. Harry glowered at him.

“I’m serious,” Harry hissed. “If...my housemates can’t find out. I mean, Hermione knows about the first time. But, no more. We can’t, Tom.”

“We already are,” Tom said, setting down his comb. He looked far more presentable than Harry did even on his best day. “Minerva won’t say anything.”

“How do you *know*?” Harry whispered. “I can’t lose my job.”

Tom moved just enough to stand between Harry’s legs. He grabbed the younger man’s thighs and tugged him forward until Harry’s legs were wrapped around Tom’s waist. Tom cupped Harry’s face, swiping his thumb over Harry’s bottom lip.

“First, because I know Minerva. I’m just going to get a dose of scathing apathy and a healthy serving of disapproval. Neither do I care for or about. You shouldn’t either. Second, you are *not* going to lose your job. You’re too good at what you do, sweetheart,” Tom said, he leaned down, kissing Harry’s jaw, that sensitive spot that Harry didn’t even know existed until he had met the man. Harry moaned, letting his head fall back against the wall. “Merlin, the noises you make.”

“You need...to get out,” Harry whispered. “You can’t Apparate into or out of the house.”

“I bet I could. I have it on good authority that I’m very powerful,” Tom said. His burgundy eyes flashed. “I know you find that attractive.”

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I don't want you tearing apart my wards and protective spells. I'm not fielding my father's questions on that. Now, get out."

DIAGNOSIS

"So...did you sleep last night? *I* didn't," Ron grumbled into his cup of coffee. "Merlin, he's *loud*."

"I didn't really expect that," Neville said, softly. He looked down at his eggs thoughtfully.

Hermione clanged around the kitchen, nervously, banging pots and pans in the sink louder and harder than necessary. Both Neville and Ron awarded her strange looks, but she ignored them. She swallowed, looking up at the ceiling briefly. Harry couldn't...he *wouldn't*…

"Do we know who's up there? Who's the guy?" Ron asked.

"One guy? Doing all that work…" Neville muttered under his breath. Hermione and Ron looked at him in surprise, but Neville stared back at them, baldly, and calmly sipped his tea.

"It wasn't...it wasn't *that* bad," Hermione said, weakly.

"They were shagging for *hours*. Literal *hours*," Ron groaned.

Hermione scoffed. "You should've thought to put up your own spells like I did around hour two," Hermione snapped, irritated.

"You weren't in your room around hour three," Ron retorted. He paused, looking at her slyly. "Where *were* you? Actually...where were either of you? I didn't see you all night."

Neville's cheeks flushed pink. "I was...I was hanging out with Hannah Abbott."

"Hannah?" Hermione asked, delighted. She sat down at the kitchen table with her plate of toast and butter and took a sip of her coffee. "Oh, she's lovely, Neville. Good for you."

"Thanks. I think...I'm going to try to get lunch with her today. I was supposed to with Harry, but Hannah is sweet and she asked," Neville said gently. He busied himself with breakfast, loudly scraping his fork over the china as a sign of a finished conversation.

"I snogged Emmeline Vance last night," Ron said proudly. "She is so fit, it's mad."

"Vance?" Hermione asked, curiously. "She's one of the leading Creature-Induced Injuries specialists. She's a fully-fledged Healer!"

"Well, it's not like she's my *boss*. I'm not going into Creature-Induced Injuries. It's no big deal," Ron scoffed, shaking his head. He leaned back in his chair, looking slightly mournful that he'd already finished his entire breakfast. "Don't know if I'll snog her again. She's

just...she's a cool person to talk to. Now, what about you, Hermione? Any a 'fair male' catch your eye. Your very stuck-up, high-maintenance eye?"

"Bite me," Hermione barked. She pouted slowly and sighed, resigning herself. Ron could be annoying and Neville was staring her with those wide, expectant eyes that she couldn't just ignore. "I met a junior Auror named...how did junior Aurors get into our party? How did *any* of our bosses get into our party? Department heads were here!"

Neville's eyes widened.

"No *way,*" he breathed. "Who?"

"You didn't see Dumbledore?" Ron asked, amused. "I mean, it was right horrifying when it happened. Snape was there and McGonagall and Dumbledore—"

"And Luna Lovegood," Hermione interjected.

Neville's eyes lit up. "I invited Luna! She's really nice."

"She's...interesting," Hermione allowed.

Ron shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Did you pull?"

"Do you see a man, Ron?" Hermione deadpanned. "Where would I have hidden him? In the cupboard somewhere?"

Ron pouted. "Well, there's no need to be rude."

"Oh piss off," Hermione retorted.

"And can we not talk about anyone pulling? I think only one person pulled last night," Neville said, slowly looking up to the ceilings. His two housemates looked up two and they fell silent, wondering if they would hear any movement from upstairs.

"Jealous?" Hermione teased lightly. She didn't expect Neville's wince.

Tactlessly, Ron said, "Well, I am. Even if Harry was a total arse hole and didn't *Silence* his room."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort when the sound of a door slamming open echoed through the whole house. All three housemates looked at one another before they leaped up and scurried towards the door, pushing it open just so they could see down the long hallway to the front door.

Two sets of footsteps echoed as Harry escorted his guest down the stairs.

Hermione swallowed her gasp.

Riddle turned back to Harry as they approached the door and he looked down at Harry.

“About dinner—” Riddle whispered.

“Get out of my *house* before I call the Aurors on you,” Harry hissed, throwing open the door and shoving Riddle out of it. He slammed the door shut and fell back against it, his eyes closed. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a long sigh.

Hermione reeled backward, tugging Ron and Neville along.

They were silent until they heard a set of footsteps ascending the stairs again. Hermione finally allowed herself to look at her housemates.

Neville was shellshocked, his round face pale underneath the bright yellow thatch of his hair. Ron was pale underneath his freckles, but quickly, he ears turned red, then his cheeks and then it went down his neck, ugly and blotchy.

“That was…” Neville trailed off.

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “So, Healing isn’t his only skill.

“They can’t...he’s his boss! He’s all of our bosses!” Neville protested. He let his head drop into his hands and he shook his head, muttering to himself. “This can’t be happening.”

“Harry *did* get to assist in that internal procedure,” Ron hissed.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “That was before all of this,” Hermione reminded him, though she neglected to tell him about Harry and Riddle’s previous history.

It didn’t seem to matter. Ron’s face was like stone. He had already made his mind up.

“If he’s not getting anything, why is he keeping it a secret? That’s suspicious,” Ron snapped.

“Maybe it just happened. Spontaneously. Last night was crazy,” Neville reminded him. Hermione cast him a grateful look, but Neville wasn’t paying her any attention.

The sound of footsteps sounded and the kitchen door swung open. Harry ran a hand through his messy hair, barely sparing them a glance.

“Hey. Is there any coffee left?” Harry asked.

Hermione paused, passing over the mug that she had made for him. “Here, you go,” Hermione said, softly. “You ready to go?”

“Sounded like you had the best sex of your life, last night,” Ron said, his voice cool. Harry looked up, eyes wide as he chugged down the half-cold coffee. “Who was the guy?”

“Um...no one important. Just some guy,” Harry said without missing a beat. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Ron watched the pair of them, narrow-eyed. They were whispering to one another, their eyes darting around as if they were afraid of being spied on. They weren't as secretive as they thought they were, and Ron certainly wasn't as thick as they thought he was. He knew Harry and Hermione thought they were smarter than him, smarter than anyone, but Ron wasn't an idiot.

Hermione had known who it was upstairs.

The others milled about, congratulating him on a good party, clapping him on the shoulder. Ron could only find it in himself to grunt in response.

"Nobody else knows. So, no one else saw them...right?" Neville asked, nervously.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "It'd serve him right. He has *no* business sleeping with him. He's the Head of a department," Ron snarled under his breath.

Neville's eyes widened. He swallowed, lifting his chin.

"Well...it's his fault, isn't it? Riddle's, I mean. He's the Head of a department. He should know better. Harry's just an intern," Neville said, firmly, and Ron scoffed as he looked at his roommate, shaking his head.

"Harry's an adult. Don't make excuses for him," Ron said, snippily, tearing off his shirt and pulling on his hunter green robes. He couldn't help but glare at their backs—the pair of them. He wondered if Hermione knew.

He wouldn't be surprised if she did. Though Ron and Harry had clicked the first day, Hermione and Harry had forged a friendship of their own that was very much based in the fact that they were both scarily competitive and ambitious, and dark and twisty. Harry with his mommy and daddy issues and Hermione had some sort of inferiority complex. Ron rolled his eyes.

They had problems?

They should try being the youngest of six brothers, all wildly successful.

"If you're done gossiping, I have your assignments for the day."

The four lingered for just a moment before they made their way to their trainer. Hermione and Harry exchanged loaded looks before they faced forward. Ron's eyes narrowed as Harry's cheeks were briefly pink as he looked anywhere but at McGonagall's face. McGonagall's eyes narrowed, but she didn't say anything in particular.

"Good morning, Healer McGonagall. How are you this morning?" Hermione asked, looking as pleasant as possible.

Ron's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Hermione was *rarely* pleasant.

"Fine. I should be asking this question of you four. It was quite a...gathering that you organized last night. I'm sure you had your fun. Some more than others," McGonagall said, lightly. She turned on her heel without another word and Harry made a choking sound that quickly developed into a cough.

"Harry?" Neville asked, concerned.

Harry cleared his throat. "Nothing. Might be coming down with something," Harry said unsteadily.

McGonagall led them in the hallway, looking over the sheafs of parchment in her hand. She looked up over her glasses, her eyes sharp.

"Longbottom, you're on Snape's service today. Potions labs for you," McGonagall decided. "Granger, you'll be with me today. Now, you two. Riddle requested one of you. Weasley, you today. Potter, you'll be on pharmacy duty."

Harry groaned. Hermione smirked at all of them in victory even as Neville turned ashen at the thought of spending so much time with Snape. Ron's lip curled in both irritation and anticipation.

"Where's Healer Riddle?" Ron asked.

"In his office. He doesn't like when his trainees are late," McGonagall said, sharply. She paused and looked at him for a long moment. "You're late, Weasley."

Ron cursed under his breath and took off at a run, bypassing the lifts entirely. He climbed up the stairs two steps at a time, and by the time he reached the Spell Damage floor, his chest hurt from his wheezing. He staggered towards Riddle's office, and knocked on the door once before it swung open. Ron straightened.

Riddle was *tall*. Taller than Ron thought he was. But, really, when he thought about it, that made sense. Harry had stood on his toes to reach Riddle's lips, and even still, Riddle had had to lean down just a tad. Ron's lips curled into a sneer.

"And who are you?" Riddle drawled.

The man whose sleep you were interrupting, bastard.

"I'm the trainee that McGonagall sent up," Ron said, attempting to sound as pleasant as he possibly could. Riddle's expression told him that he sounded as annoyed and bitter as he thought he did.

Great.

"*You*?" Riddle asked.

“Yeah, me,” Ron snapped, unable to help himself. “Were you expecting Harry?”

Riddle didn’t notice the pointed question.

“I thought she’d send Granger. Granger’s gonna make a decent Healer,” Riddle said, nodding to himself. It was as if he had forgotten that Ron had existed. “What’s your name?”

“Ronald Weasley,” Ron said, grinding his teeth.

Riddle hummed and turned back into his office, going towards his immaculate desk. Ron looked around. The room was so precise, very much like the man before him. The walls were plastered with awards. He was just as successful as Lily Evans, though Ron imagined that she was more well-known because she seemed to be a genuinely kind person. Riddle was a prick, through and through. Riddle tossed a heavy tome into Ron’s hands and then a short stack of parchment on top of it.

“Get reading for the countercurses and match it to the patients,” Riddle commanded.

“N-now?” Ron stammered, following Riddle out. “Should I just do it...here?”

Riddle glared. “Of course not. Walk and read. Now, let’s go. We have rounds.”

Ron swallowed as he started to sort through the parchments, stumbling after Riddle. At least he was being given something to do instead of just paperwork. He was actually going to participate in *research*. And sure, Riddle was a prick, but he was the leading prick of his field. Ron nearly tripped when Riddle came to a sudden stop.

Riddle rolled his eyes when Ron nearly collided with him. He paused, looking Ron over once.

“I requested a Spell Damage trainee.”

“I *am* a Spell Damage trainee,” Ron insisted.

Riddle hummed. “Really? I pegged you for an Artifact Accidenter.”

Ron swallowed his rage.

Actually, *fuck* this guy.

DIAGNOSIS

Neville swallowed hard, staring into the cauldron. It was intimidating. The man hovering over his shoulder like an overgrown bat was intimidating. The fumes in the room were making Neville nauseous and he could taste his breakfast on the back of his tongue.

Don't choke, Great Lump.

Well, then. His inner-self sounded rather like a dick. And a little like Harry, if Neville was honest.

"Well, don't just stand there, you dunderhead. *Brew*," Snape hissed.

Neville jumped and scurried towards the apothecary stores, gathering the ingredients for a Potion for Dreamless Sleep. He held them in the little wire basket and went back to his cauldron. He moved at a snail's pace. He couldn't make another mistake. He didn't think that he could bear it. He read each instruction three times before he carried it out. Neville tried to ignore Snape's flickering temper as the man watched him with beady black eyes.

"What are you hoping to specialize in, *Mister* Longbottom?" Snape asked.

Neville winced at the disdain dripping from Snape's voice.

"I…" he swallowed. "Potions and Plant Poisonings."

Snape's lips curled into a humorless smile. Neville looked back down at his cauldron, intent on keeping all of his energy on the potion.

"What makes you think that *you* are suitable for my department?" Snape demanded.

Neville swallowed. "I...I have two greenhouses. One is...a normal one. I used to sell ingredients to apothecaries in the summers while I was at Hogwarts. The second is...a poison garden."

Snape paused.

"Excuse me?"

"It's...it's quite dangerous. I have over 100 magical and Muggle plants that are poisonous. Deadly, rather. And I quite enjoy them," Neville admitted. Talking about plants always made him relax. Talking about his poison garden, even more so. He continued on, falling into the rhythm of stirring the ingredients in. "And I have quite a sizeable Devil's Snare in my parents' basement."

"Interesting," Snape drawled.

They fell into silence again and Neville felt far more relaxed.

Don't choke, Great Lump.

Harry was in his head again. Harry. Neville had liked Harry. Might even have a tiny, little, *minuscule* crush on him. He couldn't really help it. Harry was so smart and sure, a little...rough, but he had a good heart. He was funny and biting, and talented. And currently sleeping with Tom *Riddle.*

Neville had never entertained the idea of possibly dating Harry. Harry was everything Neville wasn't. Bitter, bold, and full of baggage—well, the baggage they had in common. But, Neville couldn't compete with Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle was handsome, powerful, talented, and a Merlin-damned institution. So, maybe, Neville felt some ways about all of that, but he wasn't *angry.* Not like Ron was.

ALL NON-ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL IS CALLED TO E&T. ALL NON-ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL.

The cool voice that boomed through the room made Neville jump. He almost dropped an extra fairy pellet, before he got a hold of himself. Snape cleared his throat.

"That's you, Longbottom. I'll finish the potion. Go," Snape snapped.

Neville immediately jumped away, gathering his books close to his chest before he made his escape. Fuck Snape, that man was insane and terrifying and a shitty teacher to boot. If Neville wasn't so terrified, he'd give the man's back the finger. Neville ran to the lift and paused when he saw matrons and a few other Healer trainees running up the stairs. He spotted a trainee he recognized.

"Hey, Patil! Patil!" Neville called.

Padma Patil skidded to a stop, looking at him wild-eyed. "What is it?" she asked, impatiently.

"What's going on?" Neville asked as he jogged to her side and matched her pace, storming up the stairs towards what seemed like the E&T floor.

"Six dementors were set loose through Diagon Alley. There was a stampede. We're treating for dementor exposure, and possibly some physical injuries," Padma said, her eyes bright with excitement.

Neville felt a hint of dismay that was overwhelmed with the excitement he felt. He was going to *treat* people. Like a real Healer.

"Awesome," he breathed.

Padma grinned. "*Very.*"

The two exited onto the Emergency & Triage floor. It was a battleground. There were mediwizards running through the floor, draped in black with their plague doctor masks hanging around their necks by ribbon. Scattered throughout the floor were Aurors in dark navy robes, some pale as snow, and others flushed red. Broken bones and noses and blood littered the floor, marked by the white and green robes of the matrons and the Healers.

Awesome.

"Hey, Neville. Isn't this awesome?"

Neville turned, looking wide-eyed at his housemate. Ron was grinning at him, shaking his head as he looked out at the carnage. Neville winced when he saw the man that had been

fucking Harry all last night standing just behind Ron. Merlin, the man was *tall*. He was tall and handsome, and of course, that was Harry's type. Neville couldn't stop himself from looking down at Riddle's feet.

Big man. Big feet. Big...

He hated himself. Neville lived to torture himself.

"Longbottom, Weasley, go make yourselves useful. Feed the Aurors chocolate and ask about possible casualties—fatal or otherwise," Riddle commanded. He looked over at Patil who was vibrating with anticipation. "You. Are you good at splints and bandages?"

"Of course," Patil said, all arrogance before she realized who she was speaking to.

Riddle's lips curled into a humorless smile. "Good. Let's go."

"But, I'm on service!" Ron protested as Patil flashed him a shit-eating smile and loped after Riddle, her wand already drawn. Riddle waved him away without even looking back at him.

"Fuck that guy," Ron growled.

Neville sighed as he watched Riddle walk right past Harry, his hand flashing out to squeeze Harry's hip as Harry passed an Auror half a bar of chocolate. Harry jumped, glaring at the man, though his eyes flashed with amusement. Neville looked away.

"Yeah. Fuck that guy."

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione felt at ease amongst the chaos. She was always in her element when she was tossing orders around, and it was particularly thrilling as a trainee.

"That way! All incoming patients go that way! Aurors in recovery go that way!" Hermione shouted, pointing in two opposite directions as she manned the desk. She went under, pulling out another stack of chocolate bars and pushing them over in Smith's direction.

He looked too frazzled to even make a caustic remark. Hermione smirked.

Smith was *never* going to make it as a Healer.

"Granger!" McGonagall called as she approached the desk, serene as ever.

Hermione straightened. "Healer?" she asked.

McGonagall regarded for a moment that felt like a thousand years and half a second. Hermione had never really been intimidated before. She knew her worth and that she was

smart—maybe a little too smart. But, McGonagall made her want to prove herself in a way that Hermione had never wanted to before. Hermione had never had to try very hard to be excellent before. She was just excellent. McGonagall's expectations were expectations that Hermione *wanted* to meet.

“You’re in control of the situation with the Healer trainees until I get back. Thirty minutes *exactly*. You directly report to Emmeline Vance as Head Healer of this operation. Keep up the work,” McGonagall said firmly.

Hermione swallowed her bliss, nodding happily. She bit her oversized teeth into her bottom lip, swallowing her squeal as she looked around at the E&T floor. She had always *thrived* in chaos.

“Well, hello, Miss Head Healer.”

“Not yet,” Hermione quipped. Her lips curled into tiny smile when she saw the junior Auror from last night. “Hello, Cormac.”

McLaggen winked at her. He probably thought he looked so roguish and unbearably charming. Hermione wasn't easily charmed. She thought it was more cute than anything, really. He was trying so *hard* to impress her. Hermione had never had many boyfriends—it came with being naturally more excellent than every other boy at Hogwarts—so, her standards weren’t very high, in all honesty.

He placed a styrofoam cup on the desk.

Hermione raised a single eyebrow.

“I was at Diagon Alley. Escorted a few civvies and happened to pass by a Muggle coffee shop,” McLaggen said, all swagger and no substance.

Not that Hermione minded. He was pretty.

“And you just...decided to stop for coffee?” she asked, even as she reached for the cup, bringing it to her lips. She took a long sip, never breaking eye contact. She stopped herself from wincing.

It was too sweet and rather watery.

“It’s just coffee,” McLaggen said and he winked at her as he slowly backed away, disappearing into the crowd.

Hermione snorted, looking down at her long list of things to do. A long list of things to do in thirty minutes—twenty-seven minutes, now.

Just coffee my ass.

DIAGNOSIS

“Minerva! They have a delightful pudding selection today,” Albus said cheerfully as Minerva approached their usual table, setting down her carefully balanced and selected meal. She paused, glancing over at Albus’ tray.

It was piled high of the sweetest and saltiest things he could find. Pudding, lemon drops, and a rather hearty helping of brisket. Minerva shook her head, disapprovingly.

“Has anyone been Kissed?” Severus asked, curiously.

“Thankfully, no,” Minerva sighed.

“Who’s in charge?” Pomona asked, picking delicately at her salad, her eye narrowed at the evil little leaves. Minerva never understood why Pomona insisted on eating salads that she only really ever picked at, and never consumed.

“I told my student, Granger, that I’d be back in a half-hour,” Minerva explained. “She’s reporting to Vance.”

Albus’ eyes brightened. “Ah, yes, Miss Granger. Talented one. You’ve a whole team of talent.”

“Really?” Severus sneered. “Including Longbottom?”

The Head Healer’s eyes flashed with warning. “Yes. Even Mister Longbottom.”

“Your team threw quite the party I heard,” Pomona said with a glint of amusement in her eyes.

“Oh, it was quite wonderful.”

The older group of Healers looked up at their youngest member. Luna moved through the space with a dreamy sort of air. The serenity on her face was only belied by the sharpness of her eyes—the sharpness that had made her one of the best in her field.

“You went?” Pomona laughed.

“Oh, yes. With Albus and Severus and Minerva. And I thought I saw you there, Tom,” Luna said, softly as she settled down at the table, with only a glass of pumpkin juice. The entirety of the table turned to regard Tom.

Tom slowly looked up from his notes, his eyes narrowed.

“You must’ve been mistaken. I would never be at a party for a group of trainees,” Tom said, pointedly before he looked back down at his papers, muttering to himself under his breath. “Damned Aurors.”

“I thought I saw you there too,” Minerva interjected. Tom paused for just a moment though he didn’t look up this time. “I must have been mistaken as well. After all, what would you

want with children?”

"I said, trainees. Not children. They're all adults," Tom snapped, his burgundy eyes blazing, finally meeting her gaze.

There was a long awkward moment when the two Spell Damage specialists simply glared at each other, infuriated. Luna reached over, grabbing a chip off of Severus’ plate and took a large bite, crunching through it and effectively breaking the silence. Severus snarled at her, but Luna only stared at him with big solemn eyes. She was never intimidated by Severus.

“Are you all on your way to finishing your proposals?” Albus asked genially. “I look forward to reading them.”

The Healers all glanced at one another—their competition.

“Now that Lily’s not here, one of us will finally have a chance at the grant, aye?” Pomona muttered bitterly under her breath. Severus opened his mouth to defend the woman in her absence, but fell silent at a well-placed eye roll from the Herbologists.

Luna began to regale them with a quick rundown of her research, somehow having to do with a creature called the Nargle, and its influence on children.

“And you’re working with Vance on this?” Albus asked, seriously.

Pomona leaned over to look at Minerva. “She knows they aren’t real, right?”

“I think she’s trying to prove they are,” Minerva muttered back around her spoonful of soup. She devoured her meal, knowing that she wouldn’t be eating again until the end of her shift. The conversation echoed around them and when she saw the dining hall begin to empty, she knew it was time to move.

“I’m needed on the E&T floor,” Minerva said as a goodbye.

The others nodded as the conversation once again circled back to Potter and company’s party. Tom stood up with her and nodded at the group. The two were silent only until they reached the quiet corridor beyond the dining hall.

“Minerva—” Tom began.

Minerva held up her finger, her eyes narrowed at him. “Tom, you’ve always believed yourself charming. In an arrogant, talented, neurotic way. But, if you think that I will stand aside as you cast favor on him—”

"You know I don't favor him, Minerva," Tom said, his eyes narrowed at the older woman. Minerva fell silent, her lips pressed into a thin line. She waved her hand, waiting for him to continue. "He's good. Talented. So, he gets what he deserves. Nothing more. Nothing *less*.”

Minerva scoffed.

"Fine. But, if I see you favoring him even *once*, Tom, I'll make sure he doesn't see the inside of a theatre for a year and I don't think *Lily* would appreciate hearing about this," Minerva warned.

"Lily Evans doesn't scare me," Tom said, flatly.

McGonagall's lips twitched. "She *should.*"

"I don't favor him. He's not a child. And he's *not* your child. He's got a mother. An absent one. Now, if you'd please send Weasley my way around 4, I have an emergency Spell Damage procedure to conduct. An Auror was a little too enthusiastic in attempting to help a mediwizard so I have a wizard sprouting bones from his face as we speak."

Tom stormed away and Minerva stared at him. She let out a sigh.

So, it was more than just a fuck. Great.

DIAGNOSIS

"That was a rush," Ron breathed as he leaned against the desk. Finally, the incident seemed to have calmed down, and most of the patients were treated. Only three were inpatients, one for a wayward bone-healing spell, another for Mind treatment, and a kid that Luna Lovegood wanted to keep for observation due to a rather violent reaction to dementors.

"It was amazing," Neville admitted, his voice soft. His lips were curled into the tiniest smile.

Hermione looked up from her paperwork. "It was," she agreed.

"Sorry you couldn't be on the floor?" Ron asked with a smirk. "Like a *real* Healer?"

"No, I'm not," Hermione said. Ron's eyes widened at the admission. "I like being the control center."

"So...you want to be a desk lady now?" Ron asked.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "You're so fucking stupid, Ron. No. I just liked being in control. Helping out where I can. I'm good at being bossy," Hermione said, snorting to herself. Ron and Neville frowned at her. "Everyone in Ravenclaw used to call me bossy. Like it's a bad thing. They said 'bossy' the same way someone might say 'bitchy'."

"Well, you are a little bitchy. But, aren't we all?" Ron asked with a small smile.

Hermione's smile widened.

"Sounds like something a proper Spell Damage specialist would say," Neville said, full support on his face. Hermione laughed, nodding. "Speaking of Spell Damage specialist…"

The three looked over towards the Healer in question. Riddle was next to a matron, his face quite serious as she rattled off a list of things to him. He looked down at the stack of parchment that she had given him, running his finger over the words.

“He’s...so good,” Ron snarled. “Like, I was shadowing him today, and he would just look at a patient and before I could give him the countercurse, he’d know what to do. It makes *almost* hard to hate him.”

“You really hate him?” Hermione drawled as she finished organizing the charts for all of the outpatients. “Over the fact that he, apparently, fucks like a champ and likes to flirt with Harry?”

They stared at her open-mouthed as she flipped her book shut, Vanished the empty cup of coffee with a swish of her wand, and then pushed open the swinging door of her small enclosure.

Ron swallowed. “You knew.”

Neville’s eyes widened and the two men scurried off after the petite Healer trainee. Hermione rolled her eyes, flipping through her charts, as she stalked towards the trainee room, probably to change out of her sweat-soaked robes. “She knew?”

“I knew,” Hermione said, flatly. She looked up, her eyes narrowed. “It’s been happening forever.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Ron demanded.

Hermione scoffed. “It wasn’t my business, and it’s not *yours* either, Ronald.”

“Yeah, it’s my business if he keeps me awake all night, and then, is getting favors from him. Doesn’t it make you angry?” Ron snapped, his arms folding over his chest. Hermione came to a sudden stop and Neville nearly crashed into her back. Hermione turned on them, her eyebrows raised. They paused when there was a clearing of someone’s throat at the door.

“Riddle needs assistance in an emergency Spell Damage procedure,” McGonagall said. Harry stood at her shoulder, giving her large begging eyes.

"Healer...me. I told you, *me*. I’m not doing anything, I swear, and I’ve been handing out chocolate all—” Harry began.

Ron snorted. “Of course.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows rose as she looked between the two housemates. Harry frowned as he stepped around the woman, his arms crossed over his chest, defensively. Slowly, he stepped around McGonagall, his teeth bared at Ron.

“What’s your problem? You’ve been an arse all day,” Harry said, snarkily.

“*You’re* my problem. Apparently, you can help Riddle in ways the rest of us can’t, *Potter,*” Ron snarled.

There was a long beat of silence where the team all looked at one another. McGonagall's lips pressed into a thin line of fury. She raised a single finger, pointing at Ron, shaking her head.

"I was going to say he requested *you*, Weasley. Go. Potter, go back to handing out chocolate," McGonagall snarled, with barely suppressed anger. Ron scoffed, rolling his eyes and stormed out of the trainee room.

Harry's face was bright red, and he looked down, trembling slightly.

Hermione took a step towards him, her hand reaching out.

"Does anyone know where Harry Potter is? My son? I could use—"

"Harry?" Neville asked as Harry paled.

"That's my dad. Oh fuck no," Harry murmured. He cut back across to the other door, exiting the room just as James Potter came into the doorway, just behind McGonagall. McGonagall took a deep breath, centering herself before she turned around.

James Potter.

And just beyond him: Tom Riddle.

DIAGNOSIS

"Harry."

"Don't 'Harry' me," Harry retorted.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Harry," he said again, his voice firm.

Harry stared up at the man for a long time, just looking at him. He was handsome. Every time Harry said that he wasn't was a lie. Harry lied a lot. About how annoying he found Tom. About how he hated Tom's dick—that was the worst lie because really he liked Tom's dick a lot. He liked Tom's dick, Tom's face, Tom's arrogance, Tom's 'I'm-better-than-you' attitude, especially because Harry could be...*kinda* the same way.

"You can't...I like you," Harry spat as if it were a curse. Tom stared down at him, wide-eyed, and Harry swallowed all of his pride and irritation. He slowly deflated. "I like you."

"And I like you," Tom allowed, slowly getting down on one knee. Harry pressed himself tighter into the corner of the room, turning his head away. Tom looked over his shoulder, flicking his wand. The lock clicked shut. "Why are you on the floor?"

"The world is too loud. My dad is here, my friend basically called me a whore, and I like *you*," Harry whispered. He looked terrified. "And I don't know what to do."

“Is the world always too loud?” Tom murmured.

Harry winced. “Only when I’m disappointing it.”

“You put so much pressure on yourself. What happened to you?” Tom asked. Harry closed his eyes tight, shaking his head. Tom huffed, falling back and crossing his legs underneath him. “No. You have to tell me so I can help you. What happened to you? Does it have to do with Lily?”

“Fuck you,” Harry snarled, suddenly, his eyes bright and so wide that Riddle could see the whites of his eyes. “Don’t mention my mother.”

“So it does. She said something to you,” Tom decided.

And Harry deflated.

“She...I was supposed to be a Quidditch player. Or even an Auror. No one thought I’d want to be a Healer because it...it took my mother away when I was a kid. My parents were always so concerned with having it all that they never realized that they had to try harder. My sister and I resented my mom a lot. But...I resented her more,” Harry rasped, and he was rambling, not really getting to the point. He could see the vague irritation in those burgundy eyes and he let out a trembling gasp. “I...I told her I wanted to be a Healer.”

“And?” Tom murmured.

“She was *shocked.* And then she said…‘Really? I thought you wanted to be an Auror’. Which was odd because I’ve *never* wanted to be an Auror,” Harry said, and he let out a terrible little laugh. “And when I told her that I was getting Outstandings in everything and my head of House really thought that I’d be good, that’s when she looked at me. She smiled. And she said, ‘Harry, my dear, you have no *business* being a Healer. You wouldn’t survive it’. And I know what that means. That means: ‘You don’t have what it takes’.”

Tom stared at Harry for a long time and Harry stared back, unapologetic.

“Do you really need me to tell you that you’re good?” Tom asked.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he took a deep breath. When he breathed out, he was no longer shaking. Slowly, he stood up, shaking his hands out. He cleared his throat.

“No. Because I *am* good. I’m good at my job,” Harry said, firmly. “And I still have a lot to learn, but I can be *better* than her.”

“Yes. You can.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Hey. Hey, Ron!”

Ron’s lips curled into a fearsome snarl as he spun around, ready to bite the head off of whoever was shouting at him. He paused when he was met with the no-nonsense expression on Emmeline Vance’s face. He deflated nearly immediately.

“Hm. Thought you would’ve been happier to see me,” she quipped, a wry smile tugging at her red painted lips.

“I...I’m on Riddle’s service today. It’s stressful, is all,” Ron sighed, shaking his head wearily.

Emmeline hummed, nodding in understanding. "Yeah, I get that. Riddle is super tough," Emmeline said, shaking her head. She smiled brightly at Ron. "Last night was really fun."

Ron turned a bright red at the reminder. Right. He had snogged her. And it had been amazing.

"Yeah...yeah, it was," Ron muttered.

Emmeline laughed, softly. “We should get drinks at the Leaky Cauldron some time. You and I.”

“Yeah sure. Absolutely. Of course. Like, when...I’m free…” Ron stammered. Emmeline laughed, holding up her hand and shaking her head. She rocked back and forth from the balls of her feet to her heels.

“We’ll talk about it later. I have a patient that needs to be treated,” Emmeline said, nodding.

Ron leaned forward, eyes wide. “Who?”

“It’s this kid,” Emmeline said, suddenly solemn. “I think...well...the Aurors are still here because they think the dementors getting loose in Diagon Alley was a ruse. That it was a distraction. This kid got mauled at Hogsmeade. By a werewolf, they think.”

“Fuck,” Ron breathed, shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s why Auror Potter is here.”

Emmeline blinked madly and she jumped. “He’s here? Already? Where?”

“Healer trainee room last time that I checked,” Ron said.

Emmeline nodded and began to run down the hallway, suddenly frazzled. “Thanks, Ron!”

“See you later, Emmeline,” Ron said, grinning.

Emmeline paused, chewing on bottom lip. “Em. Just call me Em,” she said and then she was fleeing down the hall, going back the way she’d come from.

“Are you done flirting?”

Ron jumped, spinning around and stared up at Riddle.

“I...sorry. I thought...I didn’t know you were going to ask for me. I thought you were going to ask for Harry,” Ron apologized, looking at his boss in earnest. Riddle looked unamused, his lips curled in rage. “I mean...you followed him after...what I said. I’m sorry about that, by the way. About you and—”

“I know what you said,” Riddle barked.

Ron’s teeth clicked shut and he nearly bit his tongue in his effort to *shut the fuck up.*

"You are on my service. That is why you are assisting with my procedure. Just as Harry assisted the first time because it was his patient. You are both here to *learn.* I don’t give special treatment. This is life and death. I choose accordingly: who I think will best suit my immediate needs and who *needs* to learn what I’m teaching,” Riddle snarled.

Ron nodded, his face flushing scarlet. “I...yeah. Yeah.”

“Weasley, do you understand that I’m your boss and not your peer?” Riddle asked, his voice so calm that it sent chills down Ron’s spine. He felt the dusting of red hair on his arms stand straight up, and he fidgeted under the weight of Riddle’s burgundy gaze.

“Y-yes,” he said, swallowing his suddenly swollen tongue. “Uh, yes, I understand.”

Riddle hummed as if he didn't quite believe Ron.

“And do you understand that as Head of Spell Damage, I have quite a lot of pride in my work and, also, perhaps control your future?” Riddle asked.

Ron paled. “Y-yes, sir. I understand.”

Riddle took a step closer and he was so tall. Taller than even Ron, who was the tallest in his entire family. He was so pale, that his freckles looked like tiny constellations. Riddle’s burgundy eyes looked nearly black with suppressed fury.

“If you *ever* imply that I allow my sexual life to interfere with my professional work, I will destroy your career and crucify you. Are we clear?”

Ron swallowed, nodding firmly.

“Yes, sir.”

Riddle drew back, taking a deep breath. “Good. Now, we have a patient to Heal. Let’s go.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione leaned over the desk, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. It was late. Nearly all of the other trainees had already headed home, including Harry, Ron, and

Neville, but Hermione wanted to stay late. McGonagall had given her a job, an important one, and she wanted to make sure all of the information was logged correctly and in order. Finally, she was done with all of her work.

“You’re still here.”

Hermione looked up at McLaggen, her lips curled into a lazy smile.

“So are you,” Hermione said, softly.

McLaggen placed another paper cup in front of her, winking. Hermione took it and took a sip. She raised an eyebrow. Earl Grey without any sugar. Better. But, not yet. Hermione drank it anyway.

“Do you like it?” McLaggen asked.

Hermione smiled instead and drained the cup before setting it down. She walked from behind the desk and walked away. He would follow her. He did. She darted into the Healer trainee room and McLaggen followed after her, shutting the door behind him. He leaned back against it, reaching back and clicking the lock shut.

“Was it just tea?” Hermione asked.

McLaggen grinned, reaching forward and yanking her close. Hermione looped on arm around his neck and gave in. Their lips moved together, fast and sloppy—a damn mess in a perfect day. Hermione rutted against him, dragging her fingers through his hair, mussing it. She pulled back, stared at his kiss-swollen lips. She leaned back in, nipping at his bottom lip hard enough that a little swell of blood appeared.

She watched his tongue chase it away.

“No, it wasn’t,” McLaggen said. He reached forward, unbuttoning the front of her robes, letting them pool around her elbows. He ran his hands up her bare stomach, cupped her breasts through her bra and then reached down, settling his hands on her hips. “I want to fuck you.”

Hermione tilted her head, eyes wide. “Well. Fuck me.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry swallowed as he walked into the kitchen, his head held high. He pretended to ignore Neville and Ron sitting at the kitchen table, digging into Indian takeaway. Harry’s stomach grumbled, but he passed on, ignoring the heavenly scent of tikka masala in favor of pulling out the bread and cheese from the refrigerator.

“I thought you’d be asleep by now,” Neville said.

“Well, I’m not,” Harry mumbled. “I’m hungry.”

“Sit down. We have food for you,” Ron snapped. Harry’s eyes widened and he spun to look at his housemate with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, are you talking to me now? Going to call me a whore again in front of our teacher and friends?” Harry demanded.

Ron winced. “I…”

“‘I’,” Harry mocked, spitting the word like poison.

“I...I’m an arse. That was uncalled for,” Ron murmured.

Harry swallowed. “Yeah, it damn was,” he whispered, crossing his arms and glaring at Ron.

Ron sighed, shaking his head and he pushed over a little styrofoam plate piled high with Harry’s favorites. Harry stomped over and fell into his chair. He dug into his food with gusto, ignoring both Neville and Ron’s stares.

“So, you know,” Harry said after a few mouthfuls of spices and chicken and white rice.

“We know,” Neville confirmed.

Harry huffed, shaking his head at the mess before him.

“So, do you want the long, sordid version or the short version?” Harry asked.

“Short will do,” Ron said.

Harry dragged his fork in through his food a few times, his brow furrowed. He let out a huff and shook his head. “I started sleeping with a guy who turned out to be my boss. Last night was only the second time. We were drunk—”

“That’s not really an excuse though,” Ron said, shaking his head.

“Cut me some slack,” Harry muttered.

Ron shook his head, slamming down his fork. Harry looked up, an eyebrow raised, but Ron’s eyes blazed. He stared at Harry with a sternness that Harry had never expected out of him.

“No. You are a Potter. Your mother is Lily Evans. You grew up in a house like this. You walk into St. Mungo’s and *no* one doubts that you belong there. No. One," Ron snapped. Harry reared back, dropping his fork to the table with a clatter that sounded like an explosion in the silence. Ron deflated, leaning back in his chair as he picked his fork through his curry. "I...I'm the youngest of six brothers. We're poor and my parents broke their backs to get us all through Hogwarts. I only got my own wand when I turned fourteen because I broke mine. It cost my sister a new set of robes. I walk into a magical theatre, and the patients are terrified."

Harry’s eyes widened. “No…”

“You have their respect without even trying, Harry, so why would you waste that? On a few good cases?” Ron demanded.

Harry swallowed. He looked from Neville to Ron again. Neville stared dutifully down at his own tikka masala.

“It’s not about the cases,” Harry admitted.

“Then, what?” Ron demanded. Harry bit his lip and looked away. “Then, what? The sex? You’re willing to ruin your future over that.”

Harry stood suddenly, moving towards the stove. He grabbed at the edge of the stove and squeezing it. He moved to put the kettle on. He could feel their eyes on his back.

“You’re falling for him.”

Harry spun around, eyes wide as he stared at Neville. Neville stared at him, knowingly.

“I’m not!” Harry protested, squeaking.

“You *are*,” Ron whispered, in awe. “Man...that...that bloody sucks.”

“I fucking know!” Harry roared as he put the kettle on and pressed his hands to his face. He let out a terrible screech that he knew made Neville and Ron flinch.

“What the bloody hell is going on?”

Harry opened his eyes again as Hermione waltzed into the kitchen, her hair free from its usual bun and her clothes rather disheveled. His gaze zeroed in on the light bruise on her neck.

“Did you just have sex?” Harry demanded.

Hermione ignored him in favor of the takeaway. “Is the spicy lamb vindaloo mine?”

“Yeah. The naan in that, too,” Ron said, pushing it over to her. He looked her over, a single red eyebrow raised. “You had sex. With who? Don’t tell me one of our bosses. I don’t think I can take another.”

“Oh, so are we finished with all that?” Hermione drawled as she sat down and dug in. “Good.”

“We’ve moved on. Harry’s falling for Riddle even though he’s a dick and a half,” Neville said with a grin.

Harry let out another screech and then fell into his chair, staring down at his creamy food. He groaned.

“He has a dick and a half,” he said, conspiratorial. “It’s *huge*.”

“No wonder his ego’s so big,” Ron muttered. He lifted an enormous piece of curry soaked chicken on his fork and pointed it at Harry. “I could give you a host of reasons why you *shouldn’t* like Riddle because he is an actual nightmare."

Harry groaned. “Please do.”

“Okay,” Ron agreed. He paused. “Don’t think we aren’t going to find out who you boinked, Hermione, because I *will* find out. Anyway, we’re focusing on Harry right now. First: he’s a piece of shit. He’s so arrogant and he treats everyone like the ground that he walks on. He thinks he’s the best fucking thing since, like, bangers and mash, and let me tell you, he’s not __”

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter! I hope you enjoyed it. This will be the last chapter for a few weeks because i'm actually right in the middle of finals. I only wrote this chapter because I really needed a break. Hopefully, I'll have another one out soon. Maybe in time for my birthday, the 14th! I hope so. See you soon.

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I don’t really care for eggs.”

“I don’t really care for your preferences. So, we’re even, eh?”

"You've got a smart mouth. Do you know that, Potter?"

“You like it though.”

“I do.”

The three housemates looked at one another, wide-eyed as they listened to the blatant flirting happening behind the swinging kitchen door. Neville opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione and Ron made violent shushing motions, staring at him pointedly. Neville's cheeks pinked and he looked down, his mouth closing with a quiet click.

“Give us a kiss, sweetheart.”

“You’re a dick.”

“You like it though.”

“Fuck off.”

Hermione bit her bottom lip, holding in a squeal.

“What?” Ron hissed.

“They’re so cute,” Hermione murmured back.

Neville looked at her, slightly appalled. “They’re just insulting one another?”

“It’s cute,” Hermione snarled under her breath before she straightened, smoothing her jumper down and pushing the door open with purpose. Both Ron and Neville scrambled up from their crouched position, intent to appear like they hadn’t been eavesdropping for the past ten minutes.

Harry looked up from the stove, a small smile on his face. Riddle was leaning against the counter next to the stove, running a hand through his slightly mussed hair. Hermione imagined that they had just been kissing.

“Hello,” Hermione said, forcing casualness into her voice.

“Good morning,” Harry said with a small smile.

Riddle only nodded at the three, his eyes slightly wide, bewildered by their presence. The three housemates scurried to the kitchen table and began to mumble to one another, though they kept a single eye on the pair by the stove.

“Oh, we should stay at your flat tonight,” Harry said as he finished cooking the eggs and divided them up, a small serving on two different plates and then the rest piled high on the third plate. “Hermione, come get the eggs.”

Hermione jumped up, snatching the large plate of eggs and toast, thanking him with a loud, obnoxious smacking kiss on his cheek. Harry cringed, rubbing at the spittle. He noticed Tom’s amused stare and stuck his tongue out.

"You want to stay in my flat?" Riddle asked. "Hm."

“What? Do you not have one? Do you have a house, Tom? With a kitchen and a closet?” Harry teased. The two began to eat their eggs at the counter, unwilling to move away from one another.

“I like sleeping in Sirius Black’s home. It makes me feel good every time he comes to St. Mungo’s to be a pain in my arse,” Riddle drawled.

“Well, it’s been a month and I’ve never seen your flat. It’s like you live here and you don’t contribute, you know,” Harry snapped.

Riddle scoffed. “Do *they* pay rent?” he said, gesturing to the nosy housemates with his fork. The three young adults jumped, looking around wild-eyed before they looked down at their food again.

“No. They do chores and help pay for groceries. More than I can say for *you*, sir. You come here to fuck and eat,” Harry said, crassly and Riddle rolled his eyes at his words, scoffing to himself. Harry pursed his lips and raised a single eyebrow. He took a vicious bite out of his toast, never breaking eye contact with the older man.

“You like having your things around and sleeping in your own bed. That’s what *you* said,” Riddle retorted and Harry scoffed though he didn’t dispute Riddle’s words.

He had, of course, complained about all those things the first time Riddle had invited Harry to his flat to spend the night. But, now, Harry's curiosity was rearing its ugly head and Riddle hadn't issued a second invite.

“Yeah, I said that, but—”

“So, why are we still arguing about this?” Riddle retorted. He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Harry’s pout, cupping the younger man’s jaw with a large spider-like hand. He pressed his plate down, cradling the man’s face fully. He pulled away, slowly, his lips curling into a pleased smirk as Harry’s eyelashes fluttered.

“You said you don’t care for eggs, but you’ve eaten them for the past seven days.”

Harry and Riddle jerked as if just realizing that they weren't alone. Neville winced when he realized that he had spoken out loud and his cheeks turned pink.

“What? That’s not true,” Riddle said, bewildered.

“You have,” Ron interjected.

Hermione scoffed. “Great. Just tell them all how we’ve been eavesdropping.”

"I hadn't actually realized that, Hermione, but thanks for letting me know. I'll be sure to put a Silencing Charm on my own kitchen door," Harry said, nastily. Hermione gave him a fake smile and turned back to her food. Harry looked back at Riddle. "See. They've noticed. It's weird. You've been here for a week. And we've been seeing each other for a month, and I haven't seen where you live."

Harry stared hard at his kinda-sorta-maybe-boyfriend. Riddle stared back, silently eating his eggs, an irritated look in his burgundy eyes. Harry couldn’t help the thrill that ran through him. Riddle was well and truly bothered by the realization that he had been at Grimmauld Place. Perhaps, that would mean an invite. Harry wouldn’t hold his breath, just yet, but he knew a few more well-placed barbs would do the trick.

“You know, speaking of my flat, I have to go—”

Riddle was interrupted by a horrible retching sound. The two looked up as Hermione jumped from her chair so fast that it tumbled backward and she vommed in the sink, right next to Harry. Harry jumped away from the sick clogging his drain, gingerly pulling Hermione's hair away from her face instead as the smell of stomach acid began to burn his nose. He looked over at Riddle, helplessly, but the man had already set his plate down and was slowly backing away towards the kitchen door.

“Tom,” Harry sighed.

“I need to go change. I’ll see you at the hospital, Harry,” Riddle said before disappearing through the door.

Harry huffed, shaking his head. He made to pull away when Hermione jerked, violently turning up the rest of her breakfast, and perhaps, even some of last night’s dinner.

"The eggs were dodgy at best, but...definitely not enough to spew chunks," Ron said, his nose wrinkled. Hermione jerked up, gasping and gagging on the taste in her mouth.

“My eggs weren’t dodgy!” Harry protested.

Neville hummed, the only one unaffected by the sudden presence of vomit and the smell of sick.

“They were a little off-color. Burnt and maybe a little too much oil. Of course, we don’t blame you. You were a bit...distracted,” Neville said, mirth in his bright eyes. Ron and Neville snickered and elbowed one another while Harry sneered.

“Wand,” Hermione groaned, her face pressed against the cool countertop next to the sink. Harry grabbed her wand from the kitchen table, dutifully putting it in her hand. Hermione straightened. “*Evanesco.*”

The sick Vanished though the smell lingered on. Hermione groaned, standing fully up again, running her fingers through her curly mess of a head.

“Are you alright, though? Hermione, really,” Harry asked, mildly worried.

“I’m fine. I think it was the eggs. Just...odd. I don’t feel bad anymore. I’m fine,” Hermione said. Her lips curled. “But, now my mouth tastes like rot. I’m going to get myself together. Leave for the hospital at around half-past?”

“Sounds about right,” Ron said around a mouthful of toast, little specks of crumbs flying from his mouth.

Hermione sneered. “You’re a pig.”

“Takes one to know one,” Ron retorted immediately.

“Can you please *not* antagonize one another for once?” Neville asked even as he sipped his tea, slightly amused as he looked between the two.

"Ask garbage mouth," Ron smirked. Hermione stalked past him, breathing his acid vomit breath on his face. Ron gagged at the smell, shoving away from her. "You can be a fucking cunt, Hermione."

“Takes one to know one!” she shouted over her shoulder.

There was a long moment of silence as Harry regarded the two other men of the house. Ron gave him a slow smile.

“So...you and Riddle are doing well?” Ron asked.

Harry bit his bottom lip to keep himself from smiling. “I mean, I suppose.”

“Well, we can’t tell ourselves, you see. You’ve finally learned what a Muffling Charm is. We no longer have to suffer through your screaming,” Neville laughed, softly.

Harry scoffed. “Oh, whatever. It’s good. He’s good.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s good to you, then,” Ron said with a small smile.

Harry nodded, turning away, suddenly uncomfortable with the affection. He pretended to clean up after himself, all the while suppressing his grin.

Harry was glad too.

DIAGNOSIS

“Fancy meeting you here,” Tom said, leaning against the wall next to the Apparition Zone.

Harry’s lips twitched.

“Fancy that,” he greeted, his eyes raking over the older man’s body. He unconsciously licked his lips—Tom looked so damn good in his dark emerald green robes.

"You make me want to vomit. Again," Hermione drawled as she hip-checked past Harry. Ron and Neville snorted. Hermione turned, walking backward as she went towards the lobby. "Don't take too long. McGonagall already hates the idea of you two. Don't give her any more reasons to snap at you."

“Yes, *Mum*,” Harry said, snarkily.

"Bugger off," Hermione snapped back, just as quickly, continuing towards the Healer trainee room. Harry scoffed, unable to help his grin as he stared at his three friends. He turned back to face Tom, and the man looked unbelievably fond for just a moment before he hid the honest emotion behind a mask of arrogance and bitchiness.

“I hardly know anything about you, you know,” Harry began.

Tom scoffed. “This again?” he asked.

“Yeah, this again,” Harry said, snappily as they walked into the main hospital together, taking the long way. They would walk along the long back corridors to get towards the main lobby area and the Healer trainee room.

“You know I’m from London. I like magic and I think your eggs are terrible,” Tom teased.

“Ugh, enough with the eggs. I get it. I’m not the best cook,” Harry said, unapologetically. “What about your friends?”

“I’m a Healer. I don’t have friends.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Everybody has friends.”

“You didn’t until, like, two months ago,” Tom retorted.

“Moot point,” Harry acknowledged. “I mean, who do you hang out with? What do you do on your days off?”

“You think I take days off?” Tom asked as he turned the corner.

“These are important questions!” Harry said, unable to fight his grin despite the rage he tried to inject in his voice. Tom snorted, shaking his head.

“Important to who?”

“To *me*, you arse. We shag every night. I think I deserve some details. And maybe I have more details than most, but really, Tom. I...I only know your *name* and your *job*,” Harry said, his voice going softer and he winced. Tom looked at him, incredulous by the vulnerability in Harry’s voice. Harry shook his head, pushing it all away. “And until I get any details, my pants are staying on.”

Tom froze, staring at Harry with wide eyes.

"Or you could just go with it? Be flexible. I know you can be flexible," Tom said, raising a hand towards Harry's cheek.

Harry’s wand was out in seconds, a mild Stinging Hex snapping across the back of Tom’s hand. Tom hissed, jerking back in pain.

“No. We’re at work,” Harry hissed. “And I’m not going to be flexible. I’m not flexible.”

Tom scoffed. “I have the distinct memory of your legs being on either side of your head last night.”

Harry responded by flipping the bird with bod hands as he entered the main lobby, scurrying towards the Healer trainee room.

“You’re on my service today, you brat!” Tom called after him.

Harry pretended not to hear him, half-running towards the trainee room. He cursed under his breath as he saw some of the other trainees already dressed and filing out after their teachers. McGonagall waited in the corner, tapping her foot impatiently.

“Glad that you could join us, Potter,” McGonagall said, sharply.

“Glad to be here, Healer McGonagall!” Harry said as cheerfully as possible as he pulled his jumper over his head and tossed it into his cupboard, pulling out his hunter green robes. Hermione was already dressed, carefully pulling her wild hair back into a bun.

Ron was attempting to Scourgify a food stain out of his robes and Neville was crawling on the floor, looking for a lost button.

At least, Harry wasn’t the only mess.

“While you four attempt to gather yourselves, I’ll tell you about your day,” McGonagall snapped. “I have a procedure—”

“Me! Me!” Neville said, jumping up from under a bench. In the process, he slammed his head against the edge and groaned. His hands flew up to the back of his head, rubbing at what would be a nasty lump.

“Not. You,” McGonagall said through gritted teeth. “Not any of you. As I was saying, I have a procedure today—all day. I have no time to babysit any of you through your sex lives and your medical mishaps. Now, Longbottom and Weasley, you’ve been requested by the Head Healer. Off you go.”

“Yes,” Ron hissed, pleased and he clapped Neville on the shoulder. “Let’s go, Nev. Off to do the *important* things. Have fun with the Accidenters, you two.”

Harry rolled his eyes as Ron and Neville scurried off.

“My head still hurts,” Neville muttered as they left.

The last Harry heard of either of them was Ron saying, “Don’t worry. We’ll stop at the pharmacy for Bruise-Healing Paste and then—”

The door swung shut.

“And us, Healer?” Harry asked.

“You two will come with me. You’re on Healer Riddle’s service today,” McGonagall said, and she grimaced at that, as she was prone to do whenever reminded of Harry and Tom’s ‘relationship, “but, his office is near today’s patient. I will be working concurrently with another esteemed Healer due to the age of the patient.”

"Age of the patient?" Hermione asked, shivering with curiosity and anticipation. McGonagall ignored her, leaving the room.

Harry linked arms with Hermione and tugged her along, following after their teacher with wide eyes. They walked towards the lift and entered it, surrounded by three Healers that nodded respectfully to the formidable Minerva McGonagall.

“Aren’t you two the trainees that through that rager a few weeks ago?” one of the Healers asked.

The two trainees exchanged looks and grinned.

“That would be us,” Hermione said with a grin.

McGonagall rolled her eyes and stepped out of the lift, looking pointedly at the trainees who followed after her like the lost ducklings that they were. Harry frowned when he saw that they were in the Children’s Ward.

“A kid?” Harry murmured.

Hermione grimaced. “I don’t do well with children.”

"Well, you're going to have to today," McGonagall snapped as they turned into an observation room. "This is the lead Healer on this case."

The Healer was *young*. She looked younger than Harry and Hermione, though, that was impossible, of course. She had long straggly dirty blonde hair that waved to her waist. Her eyebrows were very pale and her silvery eyes were nearly too large for her face. She was quite short, even shorter than Hermione, and there was a pair of Dirigible plum earrings dangling from her ears.

“I’m Luna Lovegood, the Head of the Children’s Ward. And I was in your house for that smashing party. This isn’t my area—I specialize in Magical Maladies and Bugs—but, I couldn’t pass *this* up!” Luna said, cheerfully. She took a step forward. “Hermione, it’s nice to see you again!”

“Nice to see you too, Healer Lovegood,” Hermione said, slightly unnerved by Luna’s dreamy cheer.

“Oh, no!” Luna laughed. “None of that! You may be on my service for the day, but ‘Luna’ will do. I have everyone call me Luna. Including our patient here. Meet Siobhan Templeton.”

The two trainees turned towards the young girl nestled in the bed, her two nervous parents hanging in the corner of the room, speaking softly to each other while glancing cautiously at Luna.

“You’re a Ravenclaw, aren’t you?” Hermione asked.

Siobhan smirked. “Yeah.”

“Hm. I can tell,” Harry said, softly.

He stared at the two antlers jutting from the top of her head, like the branches of a tree, leaning back against the wall. Harry knew what this was. The girl had attempted to become an Animagus and was now stuck in a partial transformation.

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?” Hermione hissed from the corner of his mouth.

Harry nodded. “So, *so* jealous.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Head Healer, it’s an honor to work with you,” Neville said as they entered the Mind Ward to see the Head Healer of St. Mungo’s engrossed with a little silver device that looked like a lighter, but couldn’t quite possibly be such a thing. “Your work in the field of Mind Healing is absolutely unprecedented, and though, it’s not my field, I just have to say—”

“Relax, Nev. No need to cream yourself over the man,” Ron muttered from the corner of his mouth.

Neville stuttered into silence, his cheeks turning rosy. Ron smiled winningly at Dumbledore, and the older man gave a benign smile to the pair of them.

“Ah, yes. Two of my favorite trainees!” Dumbledore crowed.

“Your favorites?” Neville squeaked, his flush turning into a dull red of both embarrassment and pleasure.

“You two throw *quite* the party,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling.

Ron flushed, dully, remembering the night vividly. It had been equal parts mess and fun, and he thought he’d never throw a party again. It had been so wild that even Ginny had heard whispers of it at Hogwarts. Apparently, Harry’s little sister had caught wind of the fact that Romilda Vane and her little sycophants had been thrown out of his house, and she had confronted the girls about it. It had been *quite* the scene, according to Ginny, who never really cared about drama.

“So, you requested us today?” Ron asked, leaning forward eagerly.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, stowing the instrument away in his pocket and clapping his hands together happily. "Well, I thought today would be a three-person job. Today's patient is rather...unruly."

He led them towards the door.

They could hear her before they could see her.

“*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark—”*

“Yes, Sybill! We get it! He’ll be marked as his equal. Merlin!”

The door swung open with a slam. The harried matron brushed her hair back from her forehead, shaking with frustration, a brown stain spreading on the front of her otherwise impeccable white robes. She looked up at Dumbledore with wide eyes.

“Head Healer, I just...*can’t.* She’s so frustrating! We were having tea and then she snatched my teacup from my hands, dumped the tea all over my robes and then told me I was marked by the Grim. And then, she started saying that silly little prophecy again! I can’t!” the matron shrieked, flying past Dumbledore, in quite the state.

Neville and Ron flinched. They knew that something like that wouldn’t have flown with Snape. No one would ever *dare* yell at Snape. They wondered about Dumbledore’s reaction.

Instead of flying into a rage, Dumbledore pulled a lemon drop out of his pocket and popped it into his mouth. He entered the room, his eyes quite jovial though he kept a solemn look on his face.

“Ah, Sybill. How are you today?” Dumbledore asked as he entered the room and gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, minding the tea sinking into the soft mattress.

‘Sybill’ was a thin woman draped in gauzy shawls. Her eyes looked like bug eyes, magnified by her enormous glasses frames, and she was sparkling, covered in sequins and glitter. Ron covered his eyes, just to shield them from the glare of her.

“Welcome,” Sybill breathed, her voice low and heavy with gravitas. “How nice to meet you in the physical world at last. My name is Professor Sybill Trelawney. I loathe being here. It is clouding my Inner Eye."

“Inner Eye?” Neville asked, his lips curling.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Sybill, my dear, these are two trainees that will be looking to uncloud your Inner Eye, Ronald Weasley, and Neville Longbottom."

“I know who they are!” Trelawney shrieked. Both Ron and Neville jumped at the sound, though Dumbledore acted as if it did not bother him that her high-pitched voice had stabbed him in the ears. “You both went to Hogwarts. Hufflepuffs.”

“No. Gryffindors. We just...took Healing instead of Divination. You teach Divination, don’t you?” Ron asked, both amused and befuddled by the woman.

“Of course. It seems that *you* have a hint of the Inner Eye as well,” Trelawney said.

Ron smirked. No. He just wasn’t a *complete* moron.

“Professor Trelawney is here due to the violent tremors she finds herself in when she is...prophesying. This woman before you is a *seer*,” Dumbledore said, winking at the pair of them.

Sybill Trelawney didn’t seem to notice the man, instead murmuring to herself and clutching her teacup in between her long fingers, rocking back and forth.

“A...seer,” Ron said, looking at the insane-looking woman. He glanced over at Dumbledore who looked pleased by the woman’s presence.

“That’s why she’s here,” Dumbledore said, clapping his hands together again. He grinned even wider. “This will be fun, won’t it?”

“Fun,” Neville said, sounding almost lost.

And then, Sybill Trelawney promptly began to scream and foam at the mouth about something called a *wrackspurt*.

DIAGNOSIS

“Have you tried to shave it down?” Hermione asked.

Luna giggled as she leaned against the wall, staring at Siobhan Templeton with the oddest look in her eyes. The Templeton parents looked rather unnerved, but Siobhan was smirking at the two Healers with a look like triumph in her eyes.

“That’s the first thing I tried,” Luna said, her voice high and full of laughter. “But, they keep growing back. This is very impressive, Miss Siobhan, by the way.”

“She grew antlers,” Hermione said, her voice flat.

Luna frowned over at Hermione. “Maybe not antlers. And yes, well, she’s nearly a whole Animagus. I think that’s cause for praise.”

“Don’t think her parents see it that way,” Hermione muttered under her breath. She ignored the irritated look Luna flashed her in favour of regarding Siobhan.

The young Ravenclaw looked positively *smug*. Hermione had no idea what she’d be so smug about something so stupid. She could’ve hurt herself, and here Luna was heaping praise upon praise on the girl, encouraging deviant behavior. Hermione wondered if she would have detention and house point reductions when she returned. Hermione hadn’t broken a single rule at Hogwarts, and here this girl was flaunting it off.

Not a proper Ravenclaw at all.

“What course of action should we take, Healer Lovegood?” Hermione asked.

“I’m not sure yet. Mister and Mrs. Templeton, I do have a question for you,” Luna said, her smile bright once more.

Mr. Templeton flinched and nodded. “A-anything, Healer. Is it...dangerous? Her antlers?”

“Oh!” Luna looked surprised by the question. “No. Not at all. They’re just antlers, of course. I was just...you know, it’s been *so* long since there was a magical creature Animagus, and with the permission of you two and your daughter, I’m sure the press would *quite* enthusiastic.”

“Magical creature?” Hermione asked, bewildered.

It was *clearly* a set of reindeer antlers.

“Yes. A Crumple-Horned Snorkack!” Luna giggled.

Siobhan’s smirk slipped away. She looked at Luna, incredulously. “Wait, no. Healer—I’m gonna be a reindeer.”

“That hasn’t been proven yet, Siobhan. And I think that I might be correct. With your permission, I’d like to contact the Quibbler,” Luna said, already pulling out a quill and writing something on her arm. Hermione peered closer. The young woman had notes scrawled up and down her arms, some of the ink so smudged that it was unreadable to Hermione.

“We...we try not to make decisions on Siobhan’s half. She’s nearly fifteen,” Mrs. Templeton said.

Siobhan still looked confused but she shrugged. "If I get to be in a magazine, sure."

“This is absurd!” Hermione blurted out.

Everyone in the room turned to her.

“Absurd?” Luna asked, unamused.

“First: those are clearly antler horns,” Hermione said. Before Luna could interrupt her, she carried on. “Second: the Quibbler’s rubbish. Everyone knows that.”

Luna’s smile became more forced.

“Excuse me. My father is the editor.”

Hermione turned bright red. Siobhan choked on her laughter behind a clenched fist.

“I’m...I’m so sorry, Healer Lovegood,” Hermione said.

Her stomach turned again and she staggered back, her hand flying up to her mouth, as her stomach rebelled and she tasted acid on the back of her tongue.

“If you’ll excuse Healer Granger, Templetons,” Luna said, apologetically. “Healer Granger, go and research partial Animagus transformations. I’m not sure if this requires a spell or a potion. I want the answer in three hours time. Don’t show your face until you have it.”

Hermione nodded, swallowing back the bile. She hated herself. The urge to vomit only grew.

“Yes, Healer Lovegood,” Hermione choked as she ran from the room and practically threw herself in the loo down the hallway. She promptly emptied her stomach in the bin. She wiped her mouth and rinsed it out with sink water.

She cursed herself. Nerves and embarrassment had never made her sick before, but that had been *humiliating.* Luna looked young, but Hermione had to remind herself that the woman was fully-trained Healer, unlike Hermione.

But, Lovegood was infuriating. Crumple-Horned Snorkack, Hermione’s arse.

The young trainee stormed out of the loo and up the stairs, in search of her fellow trainees. She wandered up to the Mind Floor and didn't have to look long. Ron and Neville were hovering near one of the many research libraries, a stack of books in both of their arms. They were speaking softly to each other. Neville noticed her first.

“Hey, Hermione!” he called, cheerfully, lifting his hand. Hermione winced, already whipping out her wand as the books tumbled out of his hands.

“*Arresto Momentum*,” she called and the books slowed, falling with soft, nearly silent, thuds. Neville looked at her sheepishly and nodded his thanks. Ron rolled his eyes.

“What are you doing up here?” Ron asked.

Hermione flushed. She could still taste bile on her tongue and wished that she had Conjured some toothpaste or something.

“Luna Lovegood...sent me away.”

Ron balked. “Why?”

“I...insulted the Quibbler. And it just so happens that her father is...the editor,” Hermione said. She scoffed, shaking her head. “But, she’s *ridiculous.* She keeps saying that this partially-transformed Animagus girl is a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, and she has *no* idea what’s she doing. Her specialty is Magical Bugs & Maladies, anyway, so she has no business working with a Spell Damage victim. She’s a *primary schooler.*”

Neville bit his lower lip.

“Well...there must be a reason she was assigned to the case, right?” Neville asked.

Hermione shook her head. “Impossible. Where’s Healer Dumbledore? I want to raise my concerns with him.” Ron snorted. Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“You’re only running to Dumbledore because you embarrassed yourself by being a berk. Lovegood might be loony, but she’s a good Healer. Stop pretending you know better just because she’s a little weird and do what she asks of you,” Ron said, pointedly.

“I’m not—”

"You are," Ron interrupted. Neville looked at the two, his eyes wide. Ron looked down at Hermione, all lofty and all-knowing. Hermione glowered back, her wand clenched a little too tight in her little fist. "You're a know-it-all and you do sometimes know it all, Hermione, but maybe...and this might come as a shock...someone knows *more* than you. You’re not better than her because you’re a little more straight-laced. You’re not better than her because she happens to be a primary schooler. She’s the Head of the Children’s Ward.”

Hermione swallowed her pride.

“So, what are you saying?” she asked, breathing through her rage.

Ron gave her a surprisingly charming smile. "I'm saying...get over yourself, you crazy hag, and do your job. You're damn good at it."

Hermione fought against the smile that was slowly spreading across her face.

“Fuck off,” Hermione laughed as she pushed past them into the research library.

Ron nodded. “Gladly!”

DIAGNOSIS

“Ugh. Hermione and Lovegood get a girl stuck in partial Animagus transformation and we have a man that’s just paralyzed for no reason,” Harry groaned as he looked down at the

paralyzed patient. Once again, he waved his wand, casting the diagnostics charm. Nothing happened.

With their luck, it was someone stupid that had been hurt by an Artifact.

“They called Spell Damage for a reason,” Tom hummed, staring down at the man with a curious look on his face. He tapped the tip of his wand against his thin bottom lip. Harry swallowed.

He wanted to suck on that bottom lip. Tom looked at him from the corner of his eye, like he knew Harry’s every thought. Harry looked away just as quickly, though not fast enough not to notice Tom’s shit-eating smirk.

“So, what do you think this is?” Harry asked.

Tom shrugged. “No idea. I think it’s internal though,” Tom said. Before Harry could respond, Tom was already waving over a young matron. “I need a magical theatre readied for me within an hour.”

Harry squawked. “What?”

“Yes, sir,” the matron said before striding away to do Tom’s bidding.

Harry rounded on the older man. “You don’t even know what’s wrong with him.”

“I have a hypothesis. Scrofungulus,” Tom said as a team of two matrons came over, preparing to escort the patient to the magical theatre Tom had requested. Tom turned towards the pair of them. “I need all the necessary tools for an internal procedure.”

“Approval from the Head Healer?” one of the matrons asked, nervously.

“Well, this man is going to die within...say, the next twenty-three minutes,” Tom said, pulling out a pocket watch. The male matron jerked, his eyes wide. “I imagine that the Head Healer is either quite busy or fucking off to Honeydukes, seeing as it’s around noon. So, would *you* like to tell the patient’s family that we had to wait for approval or should I?”

“Right away, sir,” the matron muttered, waving his wand. The patient’s bed transformed into a floating gurney and Harry and Tom followed after it.

Harry blinked. “How do you know it’s Scrofungulus?” Harry demanded.

"He has a patch of fungus on the side of his neck," Tom said. "It's far enough along that it paralyzed him because it's reached the brain. Or at least, climbing up the spine *to* the brain.”

“And why are *we* dealing with it? You’re a Spell Damage specialist,” Harry snapped.

Tom nodded, his brow furrowed. “Well, yes, I am. But, that doesn’t make me incompetent in every other specialty. I just happen to like Spell Damage, and this seems interesting. Lovegood should be the one to handle it, but as you said, she’s busy with the Animagus child.”

Harry followed, bewildered by the way Tom did things. Tom took risks with people's lives. He thrived when in the theatre, and so Harry had faith that he could accomplish what he said he could. But, Harry had always thought that following protocol was one of the most important things at St. Mungo's. After all, not following protocol had nearly gotten a man killed on Harry's very first day. And here Tom was, flaunting protocol and flipping it the bird.

"So, you're going to open him up?" Harry asked, deciding that he'd learn from the crazy man.

Tom grinned. His eyes sparkled. "You know, I haven't had the opportunity to open someone up in two years before you came along. And now, I'm opening someone twice in two months. Are you my good luck charm?" Tom teased.

Harry laughed. He winked. "Maybe."

They took the lift to the magical theatre floor. Harry felt a rush through his body as he walked down the hallways that he had entered on only his second day of being a trainee. With every step, he felt a swell in his belly. He wasn't sure if it was anxiety or excitement. As Tom entered, one of the matrons from before stepped forward, Levitating a tray to his side.

"Sir, your tools," the matron said.

Tom rolled up his sleeves and nodded. Harry took a step forward. The patient was on his front, his face pressed into a special cushion that allowed him to sleep. His robe had been turned the other way, open and exposing his rather flabby arse and a rather hairy back.

"It's a beautiful day to conquer death," Tom announced. Harry blinked, eyes wide. "Let's have some fun."

"We shouldn't be doing this," Harry muttered.

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Let's have some fun," he repeated, warningly. "Now, we're going to open his back. I want to get a look at his spinal cord. Are you ready to siphon the blood to give me a good look?"

Harry sighed, nodding as he Levitated the tray of tools closer. He looked on guard.

"You're cutting blind. For no reason. Do no harm," Harry quoted at the man. Tom ignored him, already taking out his wand positioning it at the base of the patient's neck. "Whatever happened to being practical."

Harry leaned forward as Tom dragged his wand down the man's back, from the base of his neck down to the middle. He waved his wand, making silver instrument fly forward to pull the skin and muscle apart, and there it was. There were little vibrant neon purple mushrooms growing inside, along the wet bones, slick with red and silver. Harry swallowed as he recognized the bones.

"Wow. The spine," Harry breathed.

Though gruesome to some, it was only magnificent to him. There was something hauntingly beautiful about seeing the literal spine of a living creature—a creature that still breathed. It was infected and ill, but it was still so fucking breathtaking. And here Harry was, preparing to banish the fungus with potions and magic.

It was humbling. It was invigorating.

Tom smirked. “There’s no ‘wow’ in practical.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione bit her bottom lip, holding her research close to her chest. She took another deep breath before she raised a fist, knocking on the door. She waited.

“Come in.”

Hermione opened the door and stepped into Luna’s office. It suited her, was Hermione’s immediate thought.

There were little knick-knacks all over the room—things that Hermione would’ve considered trash, but Luna had transformed into treasures. Luna had on a necklace of Butterbeer caps that she hadn’t had before. There were quills tucked in an empty Firewhiskey bottle and beads and sequins splattered on her walls, accompanying paintings of creatures that Hermione had never seen before. On the far wall were framed *newspapers*, it seemed. Luna hadn’t discriminated. The Daily Prophet, the Quibbler and Witch Weekly were on the wall, but each seemed to mention an outbreak of some type of magical disease or bug.

Luna looked up, a pair of pink glasses perched on her nose with bright yellow lenses. She looked particularly bug-eyed, blinking at Hermione.

“Oh, Hermione. Do you have any information?” Luna asked, softly.

Hermione nodded, biting her lower lip. She took a step forward, placing the documents on the desk. Luna gestured to the overstuffed electric blue leather chair. Hermione sat down, wincing as the leather creaked and whined under her weight.

“Healer Lovegood, I got everything I could on partial Animagus transformations. I brought the original sources, but also made notes to be referenced at your discretion. Everything is properly cited,” Hermione said, mechanically. Luna looked at her with a small grin.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

Hermione cleared her throat, awkwardly. "I...also tried to find information on possible magical creatures Animaguses. I took notes on that and brought the sources. I couldn’t find much on Crumple-Horned Snorkacks—most of it was actually *your* research—but, I found an article or two.”

She didn't mention the extensive research she did on reindeer as well.

Luna's small grin widened and warmed. Hermione felt a rush of pleasure as she washed with approval once more.

"I really appreciate this, Hermione," Luna murmured. "And really, call me Luna. I'm *really* not that much older than you. I'm barely 20."

"And you're already Head of the Children's Ward?" Hermione blurted out. "How?"

Luna shrugged. "Long story. Different story. Whole other story," Luna said. She leaned forward, her eyes glittering. "You're not used to apologizing. Or being wrong. Are you?"

"Uh. No, I'm not."

"Being wrong is important in learning," Luna said, sounding far wiser beyond her years. Hermione stared at her wide-eyed. "It's my job to teach you. And the thing about Healing...is that maybe you know the answer. From books. But, there's *always* a possibility that the textbook definition is wrong. And it's not conducive to a patient's health to dismiss that possibility."

Hermione swallowed, suddenly humbled. She nodded, slowly.

"Okay," she whispered.

Luna nodded. Her grin returned. "I Conjured a bin for you. At your discretion. Don't need you puking all over my desk," Luna laughed. "Why didn't you take a pepper-up potion?"

"It didn't work," Hermione muttered.

Luna giggled. "That explains the bad mood. The only times a pepper-up potion doesn't work is a wicked hangover or morning sickness. You four *are* party animals, aren't you?"

Hermione froze.

Morning sickness.

She counted back the days. She was late. Barely. By a day and a half. But, Hermione was meticulous. She prided herself on her meticulousness. She counted her cycle and she had been regular since she was fourteen. Hermione had *demanded* schedule and regularness, and her body had delivered as her mind did. Except, this time it *didn't.*

Morning sickness.

She was exhausted. Stressed. Anxious. Morning sickness.

"Fuck," she hissed.

She was so fucking stupid. Contraceptive spells were only 99.9% effective. Hermione was exceptional. It shouldn't be a shock that her eggs were too.

Luna's brow furrowed. "Hermione?"

"Nothing," Hermione said, immediately.

She paused. She should write McLaggen. Except, no. She hadn't spoken to him in weeks and she wasn't interested in his response or his opinion. Hermione knew what she was going to do. She knew before she had known.

"Are you sure, Hermione?" Luna asked.

Hermione looked up, forcing a determined look in her eyes.

"Everything's fine. I'm thinking of possible ways of eliminating the antler-horns."

Luna nodded in agreement. "I do too! I was thinking, we treat it like a regular wound. We shave it down and then, we can cauterize it. Like it's a wound."

Hermione forced the smirk on her face as Luna further explained her idea. Hermione took notes because she was Hermione Granger. She added her own ideas because she was Hermione Granger. She beamed from the pleasure Luna lauded on her because she was Hermione Granger. And she felt the utmost satisfaction and triumph when she took one of those fucking antlers as a trophy for her hard work after shaving them and cauterizing them.

She was fucking Hermione Granger, and no fucking zygote was going to stop her.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry frowned when he saw none of his housemates in the trainee room changing. He quickly stripped out of his own robes, looking over at Padma.

"Hey, Patil. Do you know where my team is?" he called.

Padma shimmied her jeans up her rather toned thighs and glanced over her shoulder.

"Hermione was sick in the loo and said that she wanted to go home and that the smell of the training room was making her ill. Ron and Neville went with her. They're waiting for you in the Apparition Zone, I think," Padma said, barely thinking over the message that she had nearly forgotten to give.

Harry nodded his thanks as he dressed quickly and flew out of the trainee room, taking the short way towards the Apparition Zone. He grinned when he saw his housemates leaning against the wall.

"How was the Mind Floor?" Harry greeted.

Neville and Ron turned towards him. “We had a seer. Or some crazy bat who thought she was a seer. We’re still on Dumbledore’s service tomorrow,” Ron sighed.

“Sounds both awesome and horrible,” Harry said.

“That about sums it up,” Neville said with a quiet snort.

Harry turned towards Hermione. “You’re suspiciously silent.”

Hermione looked up at him with tired eyes. There was something lurking there. Harry made a note to himself to ask her about it that night, in private.

“Luna Lovegood is both insane and brilliant. That is all,” Hermione said with a quiet chuckle.

Neville leaned forward, curious with a smile. “What changed your mind?”

Hermione launched into a long explanation of her own day that Harry nodded and paid half a mind to. There was something that wasn’t quite right about his friend. She seemed on edge, though that could be due to the fact that she had been violently ill multiple times that day. Harry knew that couldn’t be just his eggs.

Maybe she had eaten that rancid take-away as a midnight snack.

“Harry.”

Harry looked over his shoulder, pulling away from his conversation. He stared wide-eyed at Tom, his lips quirked into a lopsided smile.

“Healer?” Harry asked.

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes in frustration. Harry *grinned*. Tom threw out his other hand, long-suffering and annoyed.

“Come on. It’ll be easier if I Side-Along you,” Tom ground out.

Hermione finally smiled, a real one. "Will we expect you home tonight?" Hermione asked.

“Probably not,” Harry decided. “I know it’s my night to cook, but can I trade with you, Ron?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Whatever. At least you won’t be screaming in my house, reminding me how you’re getting some and I’m not.”

“Green isn’t your colour, Ron,” Hermione taunted.

Harry laughed and he reached out, grabbing Tom’s hand. Tom tugged him close and then they Disapparated. Harry hated Apparating, feeling like he was being compressed and squeezed through a tight straw just to be spit out on the other side. He would’ve stumbled if Tom’s arms hadn’t tightened around him, righting him before he could find himself lopsided.

Harry stood on his toes, pressing his lips against Tom's. The man returned the peck, almost absentmindedly. Harry pulled away laughing, softly. He looked around the flat. It didn't seem very big, but it clean and bright.

"This is where you live," Harry breathed, looking around with wide eyes.

It was exactly as he pictured it, and not at all how he pictured it. Everything was clean, white, and chrome. There was none of the oldness that permeated the walls of Grimmauld Place. None of the history. There was a thrum of magic through the air, but not the type of magic that built after years of existence.

Harry walked around the kitchen, dragging his fingers over the cold marble countertop, the chrome stovetop. Even the refrigerator was cold—like a Muggle refrigerator. He turned to look back at Tom, biting his lower lip.

"Yes," Tom said, his voice cold.

The man looked uncertain for the first time since Harry had met him.

"Why didn't you want me to see this?" Harry asked. "And don't lie to me."

Tom regarded Harry for a long time and then he looked away.

"My father was a wealthy Muggle, and my mother was the poor wench that dosed him with Amortentia because she was ugly and poor and practically a Squib. And they're both dead. Abandoned me to a Muggle orphanage," Tom said, a certain coldness in his voice when he spoke about his parents. Harry felt his face screw up. "I don't have what you have. I don't have a magical ancestral home or a legacy to be proud of. I can barely trace my lineage back nor do I really care to. My family was either *Muggles* or a mess of practically magic-less paupers. I have this. What I built and made with my own two hands. And I don't give it away easily, Harry."

Harry took a step towards him as if he were a spooked animal. Still, Tom didn't look at him. Harry reached up, taking the man's face in his hands and turning his face to look at him. Harry didn't think Tom had ever told him the truth about anything. Not entirely. But, this...this was *real.*

"Listen to me, Tom," Harry whispered. "It doesn't matter. Not to me."

"I have climbed my way up from the depths of hell," Tom whispered like a confession. "And there's so much more to do."

Harry nodded. "Okay. And there's more to climb. I'm sure. But, this is about you. And *me*. Let me climb with you. Let me be everything you've ever dreamed."

And maybe it was an odd thing to ask. Maybe it was too much, too forward, for knowing someone only a few months. But, Harry would follow the man in front of him anywhere. This tall, talented, ambitious man.

Tom's hands were on his waist, lifting him onto the counter, crowding close to him. The rubbed noses, their lips only breaths apart. They breathed the same air, reveling in their closeness. Harry threw his arms over Tom's shoulders, rubbing the tension out of the back of his neck with his fingertips. Tom hummed. Harry could feel the vibrations against his lip.

"Fuck me," Harry breathed.

And then Tom's mouth was on his neck and Harry was tugging at the front of Tom's emerald robes, unbuttoning them clumsily, missing a few buttons every time he worked down. Tom tried to lift him and pull him closer, but Harry resisted, capturing Tom's mouth with his own. They kissed hungrily, greedily, devouring one another.

"Can't exactly fuck you on this countertop. You don't like the Conjured stuff," Tom whispered against his lips.

"Can't move. Wank me off," Harry groaned.

Tom laughed, softly, his hands like firing brands as he dragged Harry's jumper over his head. Harry gasped when Tom kissed down his neck, his fingers plucking at Harry's sensitive nipples. Tom licked the tiny nubs, making Harry's hips jerk forward, searching for friction. Harry lifted his hips, shucking down his jeans to around his knees, pulling forth his cock and jerking gently. Harry hissed when Tom licked his own hand and then his fingers wrapped around Harry's own. Slowly, they jerked Harry off together, and maybe, Harry was being greedy, but he *needed* this.

They needed this.

Tom pulled away from his neck after leaving a vivid purple bruise. Their noses brushed.

"You're fucking insane."

"I'm insane," Harry laughed. He pressed a kiss to the skin between Tom's top lip and his nose. "You're an arrogant arse."

"You're fucked up," Tom retorted, kissing the soft spot under Harry's ear.

"You're fucked up too. We'll be fucked up together," Harry murmured, licking the tip of Tom's nose.

Tom threw back his head and let out a cackle. It was an oddity, something Harry would be sure to hold against the man. It wasn't his low, seductive chuckle. That was a practiced sound. This laugh meant Tom was caught off guard. It was high and chilly and fucking *weird* and Harry adored the sound of it.

"Sweetheart, you're too much," Tom murmured when he calmed down.

Harry laughed gently, his eyes bright with mirth. There were so many things Harry wanted to say: *you make me raw, you make me want, you make me want more—i love*—but, it was too much. It was too much, just like Tom said. He would let that stand instead.

“You’re too much,” Harry laughed, moaning into Tom’s mouth as the man jerked him off.

He came with laughter in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

A WILD PLOT APPEARS.

Yeah, it's been a while. I had finals which really kicked my ass, so I really needed to focus on that. But, now, here's a chapter: your early Christmas gift. This is the start of actual plot. I was having fun with just having a little rom-com, but I've always been more of a dramedy person. So, now here's some drama in the form of pregnant Hermione Granger. We'll get into even MORE plot next chapter, and then, it'll be pretty fast-paced and dramatic until I feel like you've had enough and deserve a lull of everything. And though angst is on the horizon, I will not sacrifice humor. This is supposed to be funny!

At least...I hope it's funny...

Well, see on the other side! Of Christmas, I guess.

Also, if you're a Fairest Saga fan...I'm outlining literally the entire last arc, so that takes some work. I need to make sure all my loose ends are tied up in a neat bow, or at least intentionally left as a loose end. Ya dig?

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione had given herself exactly ten days to process.

She was pregnant. She was pregnant with a baby that she didn't want. Okay. Processed. She stepped out of her shower, wrapping her towel tight around her middle, her long hair already shrinking into tight frizzy curls as she wrapped her hair up in a microfiber cloth. She walked into her room, quickly dressed in her underclothes and pulling up a pair of denim jeans. She turned towards her mirror and slathered coconut and jojoba oils into her hair as she tamed her long hair into a plait at the back of her head.

Finally, she pulled her jumper over her head and grabbed her satchel.

She was pregnant. Okay.

Hermione was quiet as she crept out of her room, her trainers still in her hand to create the least amount of noise. She still had about twenty minutes before the boys woke up, and she would prefer not to be bombarded with an insane amount of questions. Hermione had wanted to tell Harry, however, for days, but every time, the words got stuck in her throat, and instead, she listened to him talk about Riddle.

Hermione winced. Harry had fallen fast for the older man, and she only hoped that it wouldn't all crash and burn. She wasn't super confident in that hope. There were no such things as 'happily ever after's, after all.

She slipped on her trainers and was out the door in the next second. She only needed another moment to Disapparate with a crack. She hoped that she didn't set off any alarms. When she appeared in the Apparation Zone, she immediately moved towards the stairs, checking over her shoulder every flight. She exited at the Children's Ward floor and took a sharp right *away* from the children.

Hopefully, the zygote wouldn't ever be a child.

She walked up to the OB/GYN door and rapped sharply. There was a quiet call. She had made the earliest appointment possible, and then, had promised the scheduling matron Ogden's finest to make it even earlier and as private as possible. The matron waved her through and Hermione walked into the private office, the matron following after her.

The matron was a middle-aged woman with a round face and a very self-righteous expression on her face. Hermione suppressed her grimace.

This would be fun.

"Welcome to the OB/GYN department. Were you able to find us well?" the matron asked.

“Yeah. It was fine,” Hermione said, distractedly.

She looked down at her nails, scratching her cuticles nervously.

“My scheduling matron told me that you’ve made this appointment to discuss options concerning an unwanted pregnancy. She said that you’re here for the Abortion Potion? Would I be correct?" the matron asked, her perky smile never changing.

Hermione looked up with sharp eyes. “Yes,” she bit out.

“Good. Now, let’s talk about the timeline here. Typically, you’re allowed an abortion up until the third month. Judging by the pre-survey, you’re only a month and some change in. I feel like a woman needs at least another month or so to really determine—”

Hermione had heard enough.

"I'm a Healer trainee, so I don't really have much time. Can you get me in on the 26th? I want this finished before December," Hermione said, keeping as much serenity in her voice as she possibly could. Inside, her stomach was roiling with displeasure, and her heart was beating too fast.

“There are other options besides termination,” the matron said, instead of answering Hermione’s question. Hermione’s expression soured. “Adoption. Keeping the baby. Think it over.”

“Can you get me in on the 26th or not?” Hermione said, her voice hard.

The matron jerked, surprised by the chilliness in Hermione’s voice.

“I, well, yes,” the matron stammered. “I know this is a difficult decision—”

“It’s not,” Hermione said, immediately. The matron’s eyes widened. “It’s really not. I know that I’m not made for motherhood. At least not yet. Maybe someday, but not yet. The father isn’t in the life and I know that I’m too young for this. I have too much to do, too much to learn. So, put me down for the 26th, please.”

Hermione stood up, gathering her satchel to her chest and turning on her heel.

“Wait!”

Hermione stopped in the doorway. She glanced over her shoulder at the matron, her eyes still determined and hard. The matron’s gaze was soft, but accepting now. Hermione allowed herself to react.

“Yes?” Hermione asked, softly.

“You’ll need an emergency contact. Someone has to accompany you due to the side effects of the Termination Potion. As a Healer trainee, are you aware of the side effects?” the matron asked.

Hermione nodded once. “Abdominal cramping, light vaginal bleeding, nausea and vomiting, sore breasts, and fatigue. I’ll bring someone.”

Fuck. Now, she had to figure out who to bring.

DIAGNOSIS

Neville crept up the steps, his chin tucked close to his chest. He eased the front door open. He didn’t want to wake the boys and Hermione. That would only invite interrogation, that he wasn’t ready to hear. Of course, that’s when Neville tripped, knocking down the obnoxious troll leg coat stand by the door. There was a rumbling and Neville watched wide-eyed as Harry ran down the stairs, barely in his dressing now, his wand raised and his glasses hanging from the other hand. The kitchen door swung open and Ron had a kettle in one hand and a wand in his other.

“Brilliant,” Neville muttered to himself. He swallowed his embarrassment. “You’re going to fend an intruder off with a kettle, Ron?”

Ron flushed, nastily. He stowed his wand away and gave Neville the finger. Harry rolled his eyes and huffed. He flew down the rest of the stairs, his dressing gown billowing behind him like a cloak. Neville followed Ron into the kitchen, ignoring the curious look on Harry’s face. Ron muttered to himself as he set the kettle back down on the stove and began to make the morning coffee. Neville collapsed at the table.

Last night’s clothes smelled stale. His nose wrinkled in disgust.

“So...you just got in.” Neville looked up. Harry was grinning at him. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Neville muttered, his cheeks turning pink.

Ron looked over his shoulder, a tired grin on his face. “Did you shag someone, Nev?” Ron demanded, bringing over three cups of black coffee. He set it in front of Neville and Harry. Ron looked around. “It’s Hermione’s turn to do breakfast, right?”

“No, I traded,” Harry said.

Neville frowned. “Why?”

Harry shrugged as he walked towards the refrigerator, looking through the shelves. “Don’t know why she asked,” he said. “We have to get groceries.”

“We will,” Ron said after a sip of coffee. His coffee always tasted like burnt tar, but at least it woke them up. “Now, Neville. Tell us who you were with? What’d you do? Was it good? How far?”

Neville rolled his eyes. “You really think I’m going to gossip about the girl I was with?”

“Okay, so it’s a girl,” Ron laughed. Neville frowned. “I know you like both. Who am I to assume?”

“That is...oddly tactful,” Neville acknowledged.

Ron gave him the finger.

“You’re a deep well, Ron,” Harry teased.

Neville snorted. “It was...Hannah Abbott. It was good. Great, even,” Neville murmured.

“Oh, Nev, were you a virgin?” Ron laughed.

Neville rolled his eyes. “No, you arse.”

“It would’ve been fine if you were,” Harry insisted. Ron gave him a look as Harry pulled out the eggs. Harry shrugged. “I’m trying to be supportive. Like Hermione would be.”

“Where *is* she?” Neville asked.

“She said she had an early morning appointment. It didn’t seem like something to ask about,” Harry said.

“Don’t you two talk about everything? Including Riddle’s dick?” Neville asked.

Harry shrugged. “She seemed serious about this. Now, continue talking about Hannah Abbott. How did that happen?”

“We started talking at the party and we just...we got along well,” Neville said. He hated himself when his immediate thought was that Harry would finally express his jealousy and claim that he felt the same way as Neville.

Of course, *that* didn’t happen.

“I’m happy for you, Neville!” Harry said with the sweetest smile. “That’s good. You should go out with her again. It’ll do you a world of good.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re being dicked down every other night and you've been in a strangely good mood, lately," Ron said.

Harry paused. “First...you are a *vulgar* man. Second, I’m not in a ‘good’ mood. I’m...everything has gone too right for me for too long. Something’s going to happen so I’m trying to make the best out of what I’ve got.”

“You’re so depressing,” Neville sighed. “You’re literally dampening my sex glow.

Harry cackled, shaking his head.

“Fuck off and shower. You smell like stale sex and St. Mungo’s musk,” Harry said. “Breakfast will be ready soon. Now, we’ve got an 8 AM shift. Let’s get moving.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry sensed Hermione's approach. He looked up from Smith, Neville, and Ron's odd conversation about the best aftershave. Hermione was gossiping quietly with Hannah Abbott and Padma Patil. As they approached, Harry elbowed Neville in the side and jerked his head towards Hannah. Neville flushed pink and Ron grinned, nastily.

"Well, look who it is," Ron started even as Neville hushed him.

"Shut up, you complete arse," Neville said behind clenched teeth. His lips curled into a smile as he watched the three approaching women. "Hello, Hannah."

Hannah's lips curled into a quiet smile. "Neville," she said, softly.

"Budge over, Smith," Harry commanded, shoving Smith down at least two spots. Smith squawked in protest, but Hannah and Hermione filled the spot that he had left unoccupied. Harry leaned forward, dropping his head onto Hermione's shoulder. "Hello. You were off early. Everything all right?"

"I...we'll talk about later tonight?" Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. "Sure," he murmured back. He turned back to the group at large while stirring his spoon through his soup, his lips curled into a smile. "So, what are you three talking about?"

"The race is heating up," Padma said with a grin.

"Heating up?" Ron asked, curiously.

"All of the top Healers of the hospital are putting forth project ideas. Everyone wants the Gorsemoor Grant," Hannah said conspiratorially. She leaned forward. "Everything's quite hushed. Especially, since everyone is on equal ground now that Lily Evans isn't here."

"She hasn't won it in the last three years," Harry pointed out, feeling rather smug about that.

"She didn't submit last year, and the year before, it was given to a visiting Healer from the Congo. And the year before, she *did* win, but in conjunction with Severus—" Hermione rattled off.

Harry sighed, reaching for her chips. "Yes, yes. Stop. Please. I beg you," Harry said with a small grin. Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Once again, sharing your chips with him, and not us," Ron complained. "Also, where were you this morning?"

“None of your business,” Hermione retorted immediately as she helped herself to Harry’s soup.

“May I say, that I am immensely jealous of you four living in a house like *that*. I still share a flat with my sister and two other girls. Marietta Edgecombe and Cho Chang,” Padma complained. She leaned forward, eyes wide. “We have to share *rooms*.”

“I remember them,” Hermione said, her voice flat. “Neither of them were particularly kind.”

Padma nodded in understanding. "Then, you'll be pleased to know that Cho Chang works as a bartender while she goes for her Mastery in Transfiguration. I don't think that'll go well. And Marietta Edgecombe is Rita Skeeter’s bitch—I mean ‘assistant’—at the Daily Prophet. While *you* are training to be one of the best Healers in the world at the best hospital in the world,” Padma said with a grin.

Hermione paused. “Hmm...you know that does please me.”

Ron shook his head, a tiny smile on his face. “You scare me, woman.”

“Good,” Hermione retorted.

“Anyone know anything about to projects?” Smith asked.

“Healer Sprout has been bouncing ideas off me. Something about the *mimbulus mimbletonia.* I think she might be trying to use the Stinksap in something," Neville contributed. Hermione perked up as if a barrage of questions were just stirring up inside her brain. Neville lifted his hands, holding a speared sausage in one. "That's all I know. So, don't ask."

Hermione visibly deflated.

“I haven’t heard much, personally,” Hermione sighed.

Neville frowned. “Snape is proposing something too. That I’ve no idea about.”

“How do you even know he’s got a project, then?” Smith asked, nastily.

“He enjoys torturing me by way of potions making,” Neville said, flatly. Ron snorted at his words.

“Emmeline Vance has something too,” Ron contributed.

“Luna Lovegood,” Hannah called.

Harry huffed. “We can safely assume that everyone except Head Healer Dumbledore has a project in the works.”

And then Ron decided to be an idiot. “What about Riddle, Harry?”

There was a silence. Ron winced as if he realized what he had said, opened his mouth to apologize, and was quelled into silence by a rather furious glare from Hermione.

“Why would he know anything about Riddle?” Neville asked quickly.

“He’s always on his service, isn’t he?” Padma suggested. “Maybe he talks while he does procedures?”

She looked hopeful at the idea of gossip.

“Um...no. He just narrates everything and talks about how brilliant he is. That’s it. I think he thinks I’m a matron,” Harry said, laughing quietly. The table burst into laughter and both Harry and Hermione relaxed against one another.

Under the table, they linked pinkies while Hermione delivered a swift kick to Ron’s shin. Ron turned white with pain, his freckles like constellations on his cheeks.

That was *too* close.

DIAGNOSIS

“Potter.”

Harry groaned, burying his face in his pillow as he tried to sink deeper into his nap.

“Potter. So help me, Merlin—”

Harry huffed, sitting up and throwing his pillow on the floor, dramatically. McGonagall looked back at him, unimpressed. Harry gave a sheepish smile that McGonagall rolled her eyes at.

“Yes, Healer?” Harry asked as sweet as sugar floss.

“You’ve been Summoned by the Head Healer. Let’s move,” McGonagall said.

Harry’s eyes lit up and he jumped up from the bed. McGonagall walked away before he could even right himself and so he ran after until he was practically trodding on her heels. McGonagall only gave him a single cold look that calmed Harry down *immediately.*

“What is it? Is it a procedure? Please tell me it’s a procedure,” Harry begged.

“It’s a secret until we get to Healer Riddle’s office,” McGonagall said.

Harry sighed and walked alongside her. He would pester her more though he knew he really wouldn’t get anything out of her even if he tried. In fact, she looked so tense, that he thought that if he asked another question unprompted, his balls would be ripped clean off. Harry liked his balls and he had it on good authority that Tom liked them too. They walked to the next level—the Spell Damage floor—and Harry already knew the way to Tom’s office.

He could get there with his eyes closed.

McGonagall didn't bother to knock, letting the door swing open. Harry just slipped inside as the door snapped closed behind the pair of them. Tom, Dumbledore, and surprisingly, Emmeline Vance were all crowded around Tom's desk, murmuring quietly to one another. Dumbledore looked up, his eyes sparkling though still quite serious.

“Mister Potter, I’m glad that you’ve come,” he said, softly.

“Head Healer, what is it that you need?” Harry asked, snapping to attention.

Dumbledore’s eyes sparkled with approval. “With your parents being who they are, I assume discretion is no stranger to you.”

“It isn’t,” Harry said.

"You are privy to things that occur in the Auror Office and the Ministry, at large, then?" Dumbledore asked.

“I...Head Healer, if you’re asking if my father has revealed secret government information to you, then I don’t think that I’m the trainee for this,” Harry said, firmly and Dumbledore’s lips curled into a small grin, nodding.

“Perfect. You’re perfect for this. Harry, come. This is a very delicate situation, and it seems that you will be the *perfect* trainee,” Dumbledore said. Harry felt McGonagall’s hand press between his shoulder blades and he walked forward, eyes narrowed on the pages.

“I can’t make these scars go away, Riddle. It’s too extensive. Deep,” Vance murmured.

“Will he transform?” Tom asked. He looked up, nodding once at Harry, and Harry nodded back.

Dumbledore cleared his throat and Vance looked up, worry in her eyes.

“Hello, Potter,” Vance greeted. “Today, we’re working on a VIP case brought exclusively to me and Riddle.”

“A creature-induced injury?” Harry asked.

Vance nodded. “This injury is so extensive that it requires three department Heads and Madame McGonagall. You will be at our beck and call for the next eight, or so, hours, if not longer. This procedure will be at least six hours long,” Vance said.

“Done,” Harry said immediately.

Tom’s lips curled into a smirk. “Eager, aren’t you?”

McGonagall scoffed and Harry kept his face as still as possible, willing himself not to flush.

“This way, then,” Vance said.

Harry nodded once at Tom and McGonagall before he departed, Vance already whispering the details into his ear. Dumbledore followed after them, leaving only Tom and McGonagall in the room. McGonagall sent Tom a warning look.

Tom smirked. “What?”

“You will cease your flirting. Immediately. Healer Dumbledore is present and he is not a fool,” McGonagall bit out.

Tom rolled his eyes. “You know that I’m not favouring him—”

“That’s not what this is about,” McGonagall hissed. She took a deep breath, shaking her head. “We have a patient to worry about.”

Tom nodded, acknowledging her words. He stood from behind his desk, gathering the files and they walked together in relative silence to the private gallery that they needed to ward. As they entered, they stared down through the glass at Harry, Dumbledore, Vance, and the patient. Harry was grimacing as he stared at their patient.

Alastor Moody was a mess of a man, bit and pieces of him missing, soaked in blood. The Dark magic that Tom would have to undo permeated the theatre, even reaching as far as the gallery. But, it was the vicious tears in his skin that worried them the most. The bite marks on his leg meant that it would be impossible to salvage, so that wasn't their main concern. It was the slashes across his stomach, deep enough to press and possibly puncture organs that Vance would take care of. Dumbledore would have to maintain the man's unstable mind.

“Is Head Auror Potter here?” Tom asked, coolly.

“I thought it would be best that he remain at the Ministry. Moody was deep undercover. The attack on Diagon Alley and the werewolf mauling of the Hogwarts child are linked to this," McGonagall said.

Tom nodded. “Good. Harry will need to focus. I need him to maintain the stasis charm while we break the curses,” Tom murmured.

“Do you think him capable?” McGonagall asked, worried.

This would be delicate work. Probably, some of the most delicate work in her career.

Tom looked grim, clearing his throat. "He'll have to be," he said, and then he turned, waving his wand through the gallery, blocking it off. McGonagall did the same, adding her own layer of charms.

When they were finished, they proceeded down the stairs, nodding to all that they saw. Tom cleared his throat as he stood before the magical theatre and he pushed open the doors, striding inside. He stopped himself from asking if Harry as all right as he took in the stricken look on his face. He stopped himself.

He wouldn’t coddle him. Harry would never be *great* if he coddled him.

"Harry, you'll be acting as both matron and assistant. Have you anesthetized the patient?" Tom asked, coolly. Harry jerked, as if surprised that he was Head Healer on the case.

"I will. Right away," Harry said, firmly. He drew his wand and then paused, looking to Vance. "Is there anything I should do differently for a victim of a werewolf?"

Vance looked at him, her shrewd eyes beaming with something like approval.

“No,” she said.

“Okay. *Moudiasménos*,” Harry drawled, a shower of blue sparks falling over Moody’s prone form. Moody tensed up, despite his stasis and then relaxed, his face going slack as all of his agony drained away.

“This is careful work. We will need you to maintain the stasis charm as Healer Dumbledore works through his mind, repairing damage, Healer Vance amputates his leg and heals his scars, and Healer McGonagall and I deal with the spell damage,” Tom said, carefully.

Harry nodded. “May I ask what happened to Auror Moody?”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. Grimly, he said, “He was tortured and mauled by a terrorist group that he was attempting to infiltrate. Now...it’s a beautiful day to conquer death. Let’s have some fun.”

DIAGNOSIS

"That was exhausting," Harry breathed, mentally and physically spent as the pair of them emerged from the magical theatre. Tom didn't say anything, only brushing the loose hairs from his sweaty forehead, and letting out a sigh.

“I’m famished,” Tom murmured.

Harry hummed. “We’ll order take away, tonight? How do you feel about chips?”

“I feel that I’ll eat anything after that,” Tom said. He looked up and down the corridor before he grabbed Harry by his wrist and tugged him. Harry let out a soft laugh as he crashed into Tom, looping an arm around his neck. “You were remarkable.”

“I kept a man anesthetized and sedated. *You,* on the other hand, were magnificent,” Harry murmured, leaning up and pressing a quick kiss to Tom’s chin. Tom laughed, lifting Harry’s hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss to his palm.

“Well, of course,” Tom preened. He took a step back, releasing Harry’s hand and clearing his throat. “By the entrance in twenty?”

“Sure,” Harry said, gently.

Tom nodded once, dipping his head and pressing a quick kiss to Harry's lips before he disappeared down the hallway towards his office. Harry's lips quirked into a small smile and he went to go the opposite way, lost in his own thoughts. It had been a spectacular procedure —both gory and informational. Vance had narrated the amputation, speaking quite frankly as she did her best to knit together the skin into viciously red scars. Dumbledore hadn't spoken much, too deep into Moody's mind.

McGonagall and Tom had been a revelation, their magic working effortlessly to heal the damaged nerves, fried by the Cruciatus Curse, and the dark magic that had descended upon the man, ravaging his body. Harry grinned, just thinking about it.

"Harry."

Harry jerked to a spot, glancing over his shoulder. Dumbledore stood there, a flatness to his blue eyes as he regarded Harry.

"Head Healer, that was remarkable. How's the patient?" Harry asked, still conscious not to name their VIP patient.

Dumbledore didn't say anything immediately. "Harry, he's the Head of a department. You're a trainee."

Harry froze. He took a step back, shaking his head, gnawing on his bottom lip. Dumbledore stared back at him, impassively.

"Fuck," Harry whispered to himself. "You saw us."

Dumbledore took a step forward. "I'm going to tell you what your mother would say if she were here," Dumbledore said.

Harry's eyes narrowed, his lips curling into a small sneer.

"Are you really?" Harry snapped.

"Yes," Dumbledore retorted, just as cold. "She would tell you that you're making a mistake."

Harry scoffed. "And I would tell her that it's *not.*"

DIAGNOSIS

"Healer!" Minerva dipped her head and continued, pretending that she didn't hear the young woman calling after her. Her eyes stung with exhaustion and her magic truly made her muscles ache, having exercised a stasis for so long. "Healer!"

Minerva swallowed her groan and turned on her heel.

"Yes. What is it, Granger?" McGonagall demanded. "I've just left a six-hour procedure. What. Is. It?"

She ground out each word, her eyes flashing dangerously. Granger winced, but she didn't relent, looking up at McGonagall with determined eyes.

“I...I’m concerned. About my specialty,” Granger said.

McGonagall sighed and continued walking. She snapped her fingers when Granger hesitated, and the trainee scurried after her towards one of the more deserted on-call rooms. McGonagall went to the far corner and began to erect wards to protect her sleeping space.

“It’s too soon for you to have a specialty,” McGonagall said. She sat on the edge of the bed and waved her wand, Conjuring up a small little settee for Granger to sit on. “You have a few more months of learning all of the specialties and basic training.”

“Well, yes,” Granger allowed. “But, everyone knows that the Head Healer selects people for the program based on what their perceived specialty will be. There’s no doubt that Neville with be Potions and Plants Poisonings. Or that Harry will be a Spell Damage specialist.”

Minerva nodded. She could concede that.

“But, you have concerns about your specialty,” Minerva summarized.

Granger sighed. "Well...yes. I feel...I'm not really learning about Spell Damage."

Minerva’s eyes widened. “Really?” she asked.

“Yes. I shadowed Healer Riddle last week and it was quite enlightening, but I feel...it’s a very creative field, isn’t it?” Granger asked. Minerva nodded once. “It requires a certain magical intuition that I am...not arrogant enough to say that I possess. I know that my strengths come from my knowledge of books. But, Spell Damage isn’t about that at all.”

“It’s not,” Minerva repeated, leaning forward. Suddenly, she was intrigued by her student’s imaginary plight.

Granger slumped on the settee, looking remarkably resigned. “I’m not a Spell Damage genius like Harry or Healer Riddle. I *like* to follow the rules. There are rules for a reason and all they do is *break* them.”

Minerva snorted. More than just rules surrounding their work, she knew.

“Then, perhaps Spell Damage isn’t for you,” Minerva said pointedly.

Granger looked scandalized at the notion.

Minerva threw back her and let out a harsh bark of laughter that made Granger jump.

“Healer, I *have*—”

“Granger, this impromptu therapy session is over. I’d like to pass out for the next eight hours, and you have paperwork to do,” Minerva said pointedly.

Granger frowned. “I do?”

“Yes. My follow-ups. Get to it.”

Granger groaned as she stood from the settee, squeezing the bridge of her nose.

“I walked right into that one.”

“You did. Now. Go away.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry stared straight ahead as he walked towards the lobby, tugging his jumper further down over his fingers. He looked around for Tom and frowned when he didn't see him immediately. He turned towards the waiting area and the tension fell out of his shoulders as he spotted the man slumped slightly in one of the chairs. Harry walked up to him, dropping a hand onto Tom's shoulder.

“Long day, wasn’t it, sweetheart?” Tom drawled. He made no move to stand.

“It was. But, we conquered death,” Harry said sweetly.

Tom laughed softly. “Perhaps, not yet.” He said it like he had a secret.

“Hmm, what’s that?” Harry asked, tugging the man up from his seat. “I have a bottle of wine I’ve hidden at your place and the number of a take-away place that says we did. We deserve it.”

Tom chuckled quietly again. “We need to talk,” he said.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Is this a Firewhiskey talk?” he asked.

“It might be,” Tom retorted.

Harry scoffed. “Then, maybe I don’t want to have that talk.”

And Harry waited for him to retort. Waited for that quick banter. Instead, the humor drained from Tom’s face and he was staring at something far away or perhaps something quite close. Harry tilted his head, confused smile still fixed on his face.

“Harry, I’m so sorry,” Tom said, his voice uncharacteristically soft. He leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to Harry’s lips. It was so fast, so light, Harry barely felt it.

Slowly, Harry's smile fell away, disappearing into nothingness. This was Tom, again. Except, it was the him that Harry had seen in his flat. This Tom was vulnerable and raw like he had been cracked open by the world and all his soft insides were exposed to the elements. It was humbling.

It was *terrifying.*

“Why are you sorry?” Harry whispered. Tom glanced over his shoulder and slowly, Harry turned.

And then he saw her.

She was stupidly beautiful—tall, statuesque, with heavy-lidded grey eyes, and her lips pressed into a purple pout. Her hair was black, a mess of curls piled on her hair. Her curls were different from Hermione’s. This woman’s hair was sleek, shiny, glistening with expensive product. Her robes were fitted to her every curl and she moved with a sense of purpose. As if she belonged in any space that she decided to occupy.

“Bellatrix,” Tom said, sounding far more subdued, though a nasty undertone rang through his voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, you’d know if you bothered to return my letters,” Bellatrix said, her voice husky and biting. She smelled like jasmine and cashmere. She turned to Harry, holding out her hand. “Hi. I’m Bellatrix Black.”

“Black?” Harry asked, softly, taking the woman’s hand. His godfather’s last name? But, Sirius had never mentioned any family, not that he would’ve bothered to. He hated his family.

Bellatrix smiled. It was dark and nasty and looked oddly like Sirius' smile when he was about to pull off an elaborate prank. "And you must be the whore who's been screwing my fiance.”

And Harry’s world shattered.

Chapter End Notes

Woop. There it is.

Also, just a question: Has anyone realized yet that my Hermione is black? Because she is. Unapologetically so. When I first read Harry Potter, as a young little black girl, the description of her hair told me that she was black, like me. I had a place in that world. So, in that tradition, my Hermione is black. This will eventually come into play.

I've also made a Pinterest mood board for anyone interested in my casting. ALSO, help me find a Tom?

Also, feel free to check out my new fic:**Showmen**. It's about circuses.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry felt nothing.

Or rather he felt everything.

The inside of his chest felt concave and empty. He felt like if he reached into his chest and pulled out his heart, he wouldn't feel anything. Pieces of him were missing. The door creaked open and he didn't need to look up to see that it was Hermione. He heard her creep in, tiptoeing, placing something on the nightstand, before she slid onto the bed. She laid on her back next to him, staring up at his ceiling.

"Let's play a game," Hermione said.

Harry snorted. "Whose life is worst?" he asked.

Hermione hummed. "Oh, you don't want to play that game with me. I'll win."

"Bet you won't," Harry said, softly. "Tom is engaged to a woman named 'Bellatrix Black'. I checked the family tree downstairs. She's my godfather's cousin. I win."

Hermione let out a long breath as if the air had been punched right out of her. She turned her head to look at him, but Harry didn't move. He only stared up at the ceiling, because if he looked at her, he'd burst into tears, and he didn't think he could cry. He hadn't cried.

"You didn't win," Hermione muttered.

Harry scoffed. "You didn't hear me? My boyfriend is a lying, adulterous, piece of shit that I'm going to hurl straight into hell the next time I see him."

"I'm pregnant."

Harry slowly turned his head to look at her. He tried to smile at her joke, and then, he saw the grim set of her mouth.

"Shit," he said softly. Slowly, he looked back at the ceiling.

"Shit," she agreed. There was a long moment of silence. "It looks like we're both having shitty days, then."

"Agreed," Harry murmured. There was a long moment of silence. "Who won?"

"Let's call it a draw," Hermione suggested.

Harry hummed in agreement.

"She's so beautiful," Harry whispered, his voice cracking. "So beautiful. And...I could see why he'd want to marry her. They would look beautiful together."

“You’re beautiful,” Hermione insisted. She sat up and pulled a jar from the nightstand. She opened it gently and slathered something shiny on her fingers before she began to work it through her hair. She began to twist her hair.

“Not like her,” Harry murmured.

“He doesn’t matter. She doesn’t matter. You do,” Hermione whispered. “I love you.”

And Harry finally let out a terrible sob. “I love you too. But...I wanted him to love me too.”

He buried his face in Hermione’s lap and trembled, crying out of rage and sorrow, and Hermione twisted her hair.

DIAGNOSIS

He arrived at the hospital earlier than usual. He didn’t have a procedure for another three hours, but his anger had been the root of his insomnia the night before. It would fuel him through the day, even as he worked to conquer death over and over again. But, first, he had a Healer to confront.

“What is she doing here?” Tom asked as he stormed into Albus’ office.

Albus looked up from his desk, staring over his half-moon glasses, a glimmer in his eye that Tom couldn’t understand. Albus’ mind was the one mind that Tom had never had access to and it had never ceased to *infuriate* him.

“You and I both know she’s the best in her field,” Albus said coolly.

“There aren’t any trauma cases here!” Tom spat. “If she wanted to be helpful, she should’ve been here when that shit happened in Diagon Alley. Or with our VIP patient.”

“She’s here now. She’ll be Moody’s Healer from now until he’s finished his physical therapy,” Albus said, flatly.

Tom trembled with his rage. “You can’t do that! He’s *my* patient!”

“Alas, I’m afraid I can,” Albus said gravely. “Bellatrix is still an employee of St. Mungo’s. She left for a research sabbatical, and now, she has returned. This is a professional move, Tom. This isn’t personal.”

“Bull. Shit,” Tom spat through clenched teeth.

“Furthermore, until further notice, Severus will be acting as Head Healer in times of my absence,” Albus continued.

Tom’s rage exceeded what he thought possible. He stood, dumbfounded.

“This is personal,” he whispered. “Is this because I’m *fucking* Harry Potter?”

Albus didn’t look surprised that he knew. Tom shouldn’t have been surprised either, and yet, he hated that he found that he was.

“There’s no need to be so crass,” Albus admonished.

“He’s not a fucking *child*, Albus. And he doesn’t need your protection,” Tom spat. “What Harry and I have is none of your fucking concern.”

“It is if it affects his performance—”

“And he’s the best fucking trainee that you have!” Tom roared, storming up until he towered over Albus. Albus remained seated, so ruthlessly calm as he stared up into Tom’s burning eyes. “He’s got more talent in his fucking pinky than the rest of them combined. So don’t you *dare* tell me that my personal relationship has affected anyone’s ‘performance’. I’m a good teacher. A good Healer. And the only one fucking with people’s ‘performances’ is you bringing that fucking *cunt* back to this hospital!”

There was a long moment of silence.

Albus leaned back. “If it reassures you, I didn’t ask her return. She returned of her own volition. She works here. Though she has slighted you, personally, she’s done nothing that would demand her termination.”

“And neither have I! And yet, I’m the one being punished. I do my job, unlike Snape. I teach, I Heal, I do *everything* I’m supposed to. It’s not enough for you?”

“Severus has been improving. He has taken Neville Longbottom—”

“He treats that boy like shit,” Tom scoffed. “And you know it. Fuck off, Albus. I know this is about your favoritism for Lily. You think you’re protecting him. I didn’t take advantage of him and you know it. So, don’t fucking punish me for your *bleeding* heart.”

He turned on his heel, determined to have the last word.

“I’m not punishing you, my boy,” Albus said, softly. “I just think that the next few weeks will be quite difficult for you. Your proposal is approaching and with your...personal issues…”

“I’m not your son,” Tom spat over his shoulder as he slammed the door open. He slammed it shut, falling back against it. He tilted his head back, taking a deep breath as a matron hurried past him, terrified from his outburst.

“Aw, baby boy. Breathe.”

Tom's eyes flashed open and he pulled his wand, pressing the tip to the hollow of Bellatrix's collarbone. She smiled at him.

"You cunt," Tom murmured.

"I'm the cunt you're going to marry." She said it like a promise.

"You're fucking crazy," he hissed.

Bellatrix laughed. "You like me fucked up. You like all the people you take to bed crazy. Is *he* as crazy as me?"

"Don't talk about him."

"Oh, you're protective. He must be wild. Is he as good as me?" Bellatrix murmured, her breasts pressed against his chest, her lips brushing against the shell of his ear.

"I will Crucio you right here," he promised.

"Oh, baby, you promise?"

Tom shoved her back and she stumbled in her sky-high boots, laughing loud and terrible.

"That sabbatical you took wasn't for research," Tom snarled, his lips curling back. He could taste his rage on his tongue, as poignant as any snake's venom. Bellatrix smiled back at him, taunting and saccharinely sweet.

"No?" she simpered.

"No. You took it because I caught you. You're a cheating, lying, crazy *bitch*," Tom snapped. "You fucked my best friend. In my office. In his office. On the E&T floor. In a magical theatre. In my *bed*."

Bellatrix's smile widened. "Watch yourself, love. Your little boy toy is a young thing, isn't he?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tom demanded. "You stay away from him."

"Just meet me for lunch, baby. We've got a lot to talk about."

Bellatrix winked and sauntered down the hallway.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry stayed in the Apparation Zone. Everyone moved around him, the cracks deafening, but he didn't move just yet. He felt a hand in the crook of his arm. He looked over at Hermione

and she stared straight ahead, her gaze cold. Harry looked to his right. Ron and Neville waited, dutifully, their arms crossed over their chests.

“Are you ready?” Hermione asked, softly.

Harry took another deep breath. “Yes.”

He was still numb.

And then, they moved. They strode through the halls of St. Mungo’s, a united front, a single organism. Hermione’s hand on Harry’s arm kept him anchored in the moment as they crossed the lobby. The fact that they stood four abreast forced people to move around them. On a regular day, Harry wouldn’t care.

On that particular day, he couldn’t *possibly* give less than flying fucking shit.

His eyes narrowed on the man waiting by the doorway of the trainee room, speaking in hushed tones with McGonagall. Riddle looked up, his eyes widening on Harry. He went to step around Healer McGonagall, but the woman’s face was white with fury. She drew her wand, spitting something nastily as Riddle, pressing the tip of her wand to the underside of his chin. McGonagall didn’t even seem to notice the looks she was gaining from some of the others.

“Harry,” Riddle began as Harry approached.

Harry blinked once and then he turned, walking into the trainee room, ignoring the man. The door swung behind them with a resounding thud.

And then, all of the trainees heard Riddle snarl, “Fuck *you*, Minerva.”

Harry’s fists clenched and he turned, already drawing his wand. Hermione grabbed him by the elbow and she shook her head once

“You heard how he just spoke to her,” Harry hissed.

“But, you can’t,” Hermione said, patient.

Ron bared his teeth. “Why not? He deserves to get his arse kicked,” Ron said, already rolling up his sleeves, ready for a brawl. At another time, Harry might’ve even smiled at Ron’s show of loyalty.

Now, all he could manage was a grimace.

“You can’t curse him. You’ll be kicked out of the program. Wait,” Hermione said.

Neville pulled his jumper over his head, leaving him in only an undershirt. “Wait for what?” he asked.

“Revenge is best when it is quiet and sudden and *unexpected*,” Hermione whispered, her eyes flashing dangerously. Ron and Neville exchanged looks and nodded at Hermione’s words.

They dressed silently. The other trainees gave them a wide berth, turned away by the grimness in their faces. Hermione stepped up to Harry, adjusting the collar of his hunter green robes. She turned to Ron, reached up and stood on her toes to wipe a smudge off his cheekbone, and then she brushed Neville's hair from his forehead. She glanced in the mirror, nodded and then turned back to them.

"We have a job to do," Ron said, gruffly.

"And we're going to do it brilliantly," Neville added.

"Agreed," Hermione said.

All three turned to Harry. Harry blinked very slowly.

"Let's go do this shit," Harry whispered.

They filed out of the trainee room and McGonagall stood by the door, almost in parade rest. She looked at all of them, something like pity in her eyes when her gaze finally settled on Harry. Harry stared back, unflinching, and he felt a twisted sense of satisfaction when the pity in McGonagall's eyes drained away and was replaced with a steely sort of pride.

"Hello, trainees," she greeted.

"Healer McGonagall," Ron responded, softly.

"Granger, you'll be with me today. Weasley, you've been requested by Healer Vance after lunch. Until then, you'll be on pharmacy. Longbottom, Healer Sprout until lunch. After lunch, Healer Snape needs assistance in the labs," McGonagall stated. Neville deflated, looking annoyed, but he didn't complain.

"And me, Healer?" Harry asked.

McGonagall turned her head to look down the hallway. "Mediwizard Black has requested you."

Slowly, Harry followed her gaze and he felt a flash of rage. Bellatrix Black walked down the hallway, draped in all black, her plague mask hanging from around her neck. Hermione breathed, a sharp intake of air, freezing by Harry's side. Harry gave a frigid smile and Bellatrix smiled back, wide and hungry.

"Harry Potter," Bellatrix breathed. She towered over Harry in her five-inch heeled boots. The tips were pointed like knives.

"Mediwizard Black," Harry said, demurely. He stared at her with blazing green eyes.

"We're going to have fun today, aren't we?" Bellatrix asked, she looped her arm through Harry's yanking him close, her long talon nails digging into his arm through the thin sleeve of his robe.

"We are," Harry beamed.

“Now, don’t worry your *pretty* head, Harry. I’m going to be tough you. You’re going to want to die. And that’s okay. I’m not singling you out. I promise. I treat *every* trainee this way. Not only the sluts that sleep with fiance.”

Harry forced his smile, freezing it on his face.

This was *hell.*

And he hoped Tom burned in it.

DIAGNOSIS

Ron finished scarfing down the last of his lunch as he spotted Emmeline by the double doors. She waited patiently, staring down at her files and checking things off with her quill. She was looked rather fit in her lime green robes, her lips painted red. Ron glanced over at Neville who looked like he was dreading his potion-making with Snape. Hermione and Harry were both subdued, eating silently.

“Well, I’m off. I’ll see you all. Home together?” Ron asked.

“Might be a little late. I’ll let you know,” Hermione said, quietly.

Neville looked up at him and nodded once. “Yeah, sure. I need to talk to you though. Before, then.”

“Sure. Let me just let Emmeline know,” Ron said. He stood up and tossed the remains of his lunch as he walked straight up to Emmeline. She beamed up at him.

“Ron,” she said with a grin.

“Hey, Em. Glad you requested me today,” Ron said with a grin.

Emmeline giggled, softly. “We’ll be in a procedure today. I need someone that I can talk to. I like to keep my procedures fun and light. Any music requests?”

“Weird Sisters?” Ron suggested.

Emmeline laughed louder. “I should’ve guessed. Your drunk request,” Emmeline said. Ron shrugged with a grin. “I’ve been having fun lately, you know.”

“Really?” Ron asked.

"Yeah. Getting drinks with you are the highlights of my week," Emmeline said, earnestly. "You're funny. Easy to talk to. And you don't care that I like the Leaky Cauldron, which is, arguably, the grimiest wizarding pub in the world."

“If you can’t taste the dirt on the glasses, is it really a one Knut beer?” Ron laughed. He paused. “Also, if you want to try a really dirty pub, we should go to the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade. *That* will make your skin crawl.”

“I look forward to it!” Emmeline said, excitedly. “You ready to go?”

"In a moment. Sorry to ask, but my teammate, Neville Longbottom, wants to speak with me for a moment. Would that be cool?" Ron asked, already wincing and waiting for her to say no. Emmeline pulled out her pocket watch and tilted her head as she looked at the face. She slid it back into her robes.

“That’s fine. My procedure’s in an hour. If you can have your conversation with him while looking over these notes, to prep, that’d be great. See you in Theatre Four,” Emmeline said, passing her notes over to Ron. Ron took them, grinning gratefully. “Also, I want to hear more about any other greasy pubs we should try.”

“Sure, thing,” Ron laughed. He watched her walk away and turned around. He jumped when he realized that Neville was literally within a foot of him. “Merlin’s hairy ballsack! What the fuck, mate?”

"Sorry," Neville apologized. He was watching Emmeline curiously. "You go to pubs with Healer Vance? Is that where you go Friday nights?"

“Yeah. We snogged at our party, and then we started hanging out. And the more we hung out...the cooler she seemed,” Ron said.

Neville tilted his head. "Cooler? Are you into her? She's a Healer. You're a trainee."

“Yeah. I was...hesitant about that. Especially more so, now that the thing with Harry and...you-know-who is a mess. But, I don’t think it matters. I see her as a friend, I think,” Ron said with a shrug. “A really fit friend, but a friend.”

Neville raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think that she sees you as a friend, Ron.”

Ron shook his head. “Look, mate, what do you want to talk about?” he asked, gracelessly redirecting the conversation. Neville gave him a last uncertain look before sighing.

“I’m worried about Harry.”

“As you should be. Riddle is a fucking twat,” Ron snapped, his eyes narrowing.

Neville nodded in agreement. “Yeah. But, he’s...there’s…” Neville trailed off, looking away. “I want to help him somehow.”

Ron stared at him for a long time and then winced as if he had just realized something.

“You fancy him,” Ron said, softly.

Neville looked up, his eyes wide. His cheeks flushed pink and he shook his head. He revealed himself when he couldn’t help but look over his shoulder.

“I...I’m sorta with Hannah,” Neville said.

Ron stared at him. “You can fancy two people at once, Neville. You fancy him. But, it’s not going to happen. Ever.”

“No need to be an arse,” Neville snapped.

Ron sighed. “I’m not. It’s not going to happen. He hasn’t said it but he loved Riddle. He did. And he’s broken. Harry. He’s been broken for a long time, I think. And you would do him more good as his friend than anything else. Don’t tell him.”

He left Neville there, going to look over Emmeline’s notes. He didn’t need Neville’s reassurance to know that Neville would do as he said.

DIAGNOSIS

“Apply Burn-Healing Paste and a bandage. You *do* know the bandage spell, don’t you?” Bellatrix drawled as she leaned against the wall, stroking along the long beak of her plague doctor mask.

“Yes,” Harry spat. “I don’t know why I would be Healing a dueling injury with burn-healing paste.”

Bellatrix huffed and pointed to the base of the patient’s neck.

"Do you see along there? The base of his neck is inflamed. That usually indicates Mind magic. The brainstem is up here," Bellatrix said, tracing her hand up. The patient hissed in pain and shot her an irritated look. She returned it with a fearsome baring of her teeth that made the patient docile once more. "The burn-healing paste in this instance isn't about the dermis...skin, if you will. It's metaphorical and it isn't. The brain is tricky and since I'm a mediwizard, I don't deal with Mind magic. But, we can assist by encouraging it to heal by itself. So, what we'll prescribe is this Gotu kola based paste that will be applied along here. But, we'll put it now and then seal it. Understood?"

“Yes, Healer,” Harry said, wide-eyed. He did as the woman bid, festering with rage.

Bellatrix was a fucking dick. That much was clear. She enjoyed mocking the fact that he knew so little about mediwizardry and E&T. She made snide comments about him being a slut, and even worse, she called him a lost little lamb. But, she was a good Healer, and a decent teacher when she wanted to be. She took her job seriously.

“You’ll want to come back for a follow-up in two weeks in the Mind Ward,” Bellatrix was saying to the patient. She paused to exam Harry’s work and hummed, looking at him with dark eyes. “Adequate. Perhaps there’s hope for you, Potter.”

“I’m not going to be a mediwizard,” Harry snarled.

Bellatrix laughed. “Clearly. You don’t have the aptitude. But, maybe a fine matron.”

Harry ground his teeth together as he pulled off his gloves with a clear snap and pressed the remaining burn paste into the patient's hands.

“My shift is finished. Do you need anything else from me, Healer?” Harry bit out, attempting to sound as pleasant as possible.

Bellatrix smirked. “No. Allow me to escort you to the trainee room, sweetheart.”

Harry snapped.

“Don’t. Call. Me. That,” he snarled, his nostrils flaring with fury.

Bellatrix’s eyes widened. She stared at Harry for a long moment as if she was staring at something far away. “What?”

“I respect you as a Healer. But, I’m tired of your shit,” Harry hissed. “Stop making fun of me. Stop patronizing me. Stop treating me like crap because your fiance, or whatever, decided he wanted *me.*”

Bellatrix blinked.

“I see why now,” she muttered.

Harry turned on his heel and he hated how she followed him to the lift despite his swift snarling. He pressed the lift button a little more violently than he should. When it came, Bellatrix let out a huff of laughter as they stared into the elevator. Harry pressed his lips into a thin line to keep himself from crying.

Tom looked up from his papers, his eyes widening as he stared at the pair of them.

Bellatrix stepped forward, grinning “Tom, ba—”

“Harry,” Tom breathed.

Harry stepped into the lift and turn around, leaning against the wall as he tried to swallow the bile that was forcing its way up from his stomach.

“Harry, please, don’t ignore me. We have to talk,” Tom said quietly.

“We need to talk too, Tom. I noticed you avoided me at lunch,” Bellatrix tried.

Tom hissed. “Shut up, Bellatrix.”

Bellatrix made a wounded sound and Harry closed his eyes, shaking his head. When the lift open, he practically ran out even as Tom reached out, his fingertips brushing against the ends of Harry’s wild curls. The older man looked over at Bellatrix. She stared at his fingertips, a curious expression on her face. She seemed both wounded and trapped and full of fury. And then, she looked at him with those terrible eyes.

Tom walked away. He knew she would follow.

DIAGNOSIS

“Are you ready to talk?” Bellatrix purred as she caught up with Tom as he strode to the cafeteria for dinner before a late night session intended on working out the finer details of his project proposal.

His appetite abandoned him nearly immediately and he cringed, turning on his heel, heading back to the lobby and towards the lifts.

“I missed you at lunch. I stopped by your office, but every time I touched the knob, it burned me,” Bellatrix pouted as she practically skipped after him.

“Good, then. My wards work,” Tom snapped.

Bellatrix huffed. “Tom, we *need* to talk.” She sounded far more serious now.

“Talk about this: me, walking away,” Tom spat, storming away.

He had one moment of perfect silence as he made his way down the hall, without anyone following him.

“Walking away? That’s all I get?” Bellatrix roared, stalking after Tom down the hallway. Tom dipped his head forward, trying to ignore her.

He hissed over his shoulder, “Calm down.”

“What? You’re not going to yell at me? Call me names? Are we past that?” Bellatrix demanded.

Tom spun on his heel. “You need someone to tell you how much of a bitch you are?”

“No! I need you to care!” Bellatrix snarled. She reached for Tom, but he jerked away, shaking his head. Bellatrix trembled, wrapping her arms around herself. “I slept with your best friend.”

“I’m aware,” Tom said, coldly.

“You don’t care that I slept with your best friend. You care that I ruined your *pride*. Your reputation. Your *ego*. From the moment I met you, I knew...I knew I would be third. After your work and your ego. But, I never thought that you wouldn’t *care*,” Bellatrix hissed, her voice cracking and she took a step closer, looking up at the taller man, trembling with her rage.

“You’re crazy,” Tom retorted.

Bellatrix let out a sharp, barking laugh as they stormed through the Healer's corridor off the lobby.

"What do I have to do to get you care, Tom? Simper after you? Call you brilliant? Bang every night? Yes, I fucked Rodolphus! Yes, I destroyed your research when you threw me and my shit out of our *house*! I did that!" Bellatrix roared, uncaring now about who heard. "But, you that doesn't matter to you anymore because I don't ignore you in lifts and I'm not Harry *bloody* Potter!"

There was a sudden silence throughout the entire corridor.

Tom took a step back, his burgundy eyes wide as he took in the matrons and the trainees and the other Healers. And worst of all, Hermione and Harry stood in the trainee doorway, already dressed in their civilian clothes. Hermione looked caught between rage and horror. Harry's bottom lip trembled and then he drew himself together, more tightly wound and colder than Tom had ever seen him.

He took a careful step forward, his breath a quiet gasping. He took another step. And then, he broke into a run.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted after him, making to run after him. Weasley grabbed her arm, jerking her back. Hermione tugged herself away, trembling with fury. "You both should be *ashamed* of yourselves! How *dare* you!"

She stormed off after Harry, her fury draining away for concern.

Tom closed his eyes and waited to drown. And then he walked away.

There was a conversation to be had.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry wasn't surprised when Tom found him in the magical theatre where Harry had participated in his first internal procedure. Harry brushed his fingers over the floating slab, pretending that he hadn't seen the man. Tom looked content to wait. That just made Harry angrier. Slowly, he looked up at Tom, making sure to keep the slab between them.

"You have a wife."

"Fiance," Tom corrected, his voice so very quiet.

Harry gave a slow, biting smile. "You have a fiance," Harry drawled. He took a step closer. "You and your fiance embarrassed me. Made me out to be a whore at my *workplace*. How *dare* you?"

"She was shouting it. That wasn't my fault!" Tom snapped back.

“You are a liar. You are a cheater. You are an arrogant piece of shit, and I can’t believe I wasted my time on you,” Harry hissed, stalking forward.

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “You’re being a child. You don’t know what she—”

“I don’t give a *fuck* what she did. There were two people in this relationship. You and me. At least, I thought there were. Three is a bit crowded, yeah?” Harry demanded and he slowly pulled his wand, pressing it to Tom’s sternum.

“Harry, I know—”

“You don’t *know* anything,” Harry retorted. “You should’ve told me! If you *knew* anything, you would know that I’m in *this* close to using all of those curses that my Auror father told me never to use and curse you into *oblivion!*”

“She cheated on me,” Tom said, quietly.

Harry took a step back, his eyes wide.

“Did she?” Harry whispered.

“Yes.”

“But, you didn’t break up with her,” Harry said.

Tom nearly winced. “No.”

“I see,” Harry murmured. He tilted his head, staring at Tom. “You think that’s going to change anything. But, it's not. All this changes is the fact that my personal life is out at my workplace. All this changes is the fact that people think I've fucked my way into my procedures. I can’t be on your service anymore.”

“You’re the best Spell Damage trainee this program has spat out in a long time,” Tom said.

“I know,” Harry said. “But, that’s in doubt now, isn’t it?”

He gave a slow cool smile.

“Harry—”

“No. You lied to me. I can’t do this right now,” Harry said flatly. “My friend is waiting for me.”

Harry pushed away and looked up at the gallery. Hermione was watching. Harry left him there. He didn’t look back. He walked up the steps to the gallery and Hermione was standing in the gallery doorway, waiting for him.

“Are you okay, still?” Hermione asked.

Harry’s brow creased. “Why?”

“Because...I know it’s selfish. But, I need you,” Hermione said.

“Anything,” Harry said immediately.

Hermione’s bottom lip quivered. “I...I told you I was pregnant because I needed an emergency contact. Because of the side-effects. Anyway, I put your name down. You’re my person,” Hermione muttered, attempting to sound as cold as possible.

Harry’s eyes widened. “I am?”

“Yeah. Whatever,” Hermione said.

Harry's lips curled into a sad little smile and he threw his arms around her, hugging her tight. Hermione's arms came up slower but when she did hug him, he felt more like she was holding him together. He stopped himself from collapsing into her arms and pulled back just enough to see her face.

“Let’s go do this,” Harry whispered.

“Okay.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Why aren’t you inside?”

Hermione looked over at Ron and slowly lifted her cigarette back up to her lips. She took a long drag, letting the smoke fill all of her before she released it, blowing away the tension in her back. She winced, grunting softly when another round of cramps ripped out of her. She sat on the stone staircase railing, her back against the brick housefront, one leg tucked against her chest, the other straight out.

“I needed a smoke,” Hermione said quietly.

“What’s been up with you?” Ron asked.

Hermione huffed. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bugger that. You’ve been off your game. What’s wrong?” Ron spat.

“None of your business.”

“You *are* my business," Ron snapped back. Hermione looked up at him, her eyes wide. Slowly, she passed the cigarette towards him and he snatched it, taking a long drag before passing it back. After he blew out the smoke, he turned to her. "You think you aren't? We live together. You're my friend. Of course, you're my business. So, what is it?"

“I took an Abortion Potion today.”

Ron’s eyes widened. “What? You were...and now you’re not,” Ron said with wide eyes.

“Now, I’m not,” Hermione said.

“Why? My mum...she said she hated the idea of that potion. Said it killed,” Ron said softly.

“The embryo wasn’t alive,” Hermione said fiercely. “It couldn’t sustain life on its own. It was a parasite. And I’m a Healer. I destroy parasites.”

“I wasn’t saying that about you. Just saying what my mum says,” Ron snapped back, just as irritated. He held his hand out and Hermione huffed, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of her back pocket and flicking it open with her thumb.

Ron drew one out, pulling out his wand. He lit the end and stowed his wand away.

“I don’t feel bad about it and I don’t regret it. The matron thought I would. Practically laughed in her face,” Hermione said, her lips twisted up into a terrible smile. “I’d be a horrible mother. I’d be Lily Evans. And I wouldn’t ever want to wish that on a child.”

“I think you’d be great,” Ron said fiercely.

Hermione stared at him with amused condescension. “You think too highly of me,” she said, softly. “If I ever have a daughter, I would name her ‘Rose’.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” Ron said, gently.

Hermione hummed. “I didn’t do this for shits and giggles. I didn’t do this for nothing. I’m going to be the best.”

And then she put out her cigarette and tossed the butt over the railing. She stood up, smoothing out her jumper and went to go inside. Ron’s fingers wrapped around hers and she stopped, looking up at him with wide eyes. Ron looked down at their hands, both wrapped around the knob, just as surprised as her.

“What?” Hermione asked.

“I came out here because he’s on the floor. Crying in the foyer. I need you to know that,” Ron said, quietly.

Hermione swallowed. “Okay.”

“We can stay out here for another minute.”

“Why would we wait?” Hermione asked.

And Ron looked at her with the softest eyes. “Because you’re crying,” Ron said, lifting his other hand to wipe away the tears from her cheeks.

“Oh. I didn’t realize,” Hermione said quietly. She wiped away her own tears, swallowing all of it up inside of her. “I’m not even sad. I’m angry. So, so *angry.*”

“That’s okay. We’re here for you. And you’re angry. And I’m angry. And Neville’s angry. And Harry’s on the floor. Are you ready?” Ron asked.

Their hands were still wrapped together, resting on the knob.

“Yeah,” Hermione whispered.

They opened the door together. Hermione stepped through the door first, alone. Ron shut the door behind them, locking it quickly.

Hermione stared, impassively. Neville sat on the steps, looking down at the middle of their foyer, cringing away from the terrible sobs that wracked the body curled up on the cold wooden floor. Hermione took a step forward even as Ron winced as Harry let out a terrible sobbing scream. Hermione pushed away the cramping agony and gracefully fell to her knees, taking Harry by the face.

“Enough,” she whispered, softly. “Enough.”

Harry whimpered as he looked up at her. Hermione dutifully wiped away the tears from his cheeks and paused when she realized that they were long dried. Hermione nodded and then she tugged Harry to his feet, standing up with him.

“I don’t...I can’t…” Harry’s voice broke. “It *hurts*. I’ve never...*hurt* like this.”

“That’s called heartbreak,” Neville said, quietly. Hermione and Harry looked at him as he stood on the steps. “It’s a bitch.”

Harry let out a watery laugh. “Yeah. It is.”

“Okay. This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to go to the parlor,” Hermione said. She looked at Ron and Neville. “You too. We’re going to do this together. As a family.”

“A family?” Ron asked.

“Yes,” Hermione said, fiercely. “We’re a family. This is your *family,* Harry Potter. And we are here. You are *not* alone. We are not alone. Do you understand me?”

“Y-yes,” Harry whispered.

Hermione marched him into the parlor and she drew her wand, waving it. The lights all slowly glowed on and the radio crackled as it turned on. Ron winced as a Weird Sisters song blasted through, cutting uncomfortably through somber mood. He moved to turn it off.

“No. Leave it,” Hermione said.

“Leave it?” Neville asked. “Don’t you think it’s a little...inappropriate?”

“Yes,” Hermione said. And then she began to jump up and down, shaking out her hands and let out a shriek that made Neville clap his hands to his ears and Harry jumped, shocked.

“What are you doing, you mad woman?” Ron snarled.

“Dancing it out! Screaming!” Hermione roared and she pumped her fist through the air, jumping and dancing and twisting and turning. Neville’s eyes widened and his lips tilted into a slow, quiet smile.

And then he walked up to Hermione and grabbed her hands. Hermione laughed as he turned her and dipped her. They two began to jump up and down, howling like a pair of banshees. Harry looked properly spooked, looking between the pair of them. Ron hesitantly stepped forward and then he grabbed both of Harry’s hands, swinging him around. Harry let out a startled noise that sounded like a strangled laugh. Ron grinned down at him as he whooped.

“DANCE IT OUT!” Ron shouted.

Harry bit his lip trying to fight a smile. And then he let out a loud scream, piercing and terrible and bright.

They danced all night.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, y'all hey! Here's another dope chapter of Diagnosis full of sadness, but also, maybe, hope. :D

Harry didn't punch anyone in the face like you thought he might, but he's still processing. Give him a moment.

Anyway! Check out my story **Showmen**. It's good. It's all about Tom Riddle. And circuses.

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Side-Apparation was Ron's least favorite way of Apparating, but his headache that morning had demanded it. He looked over at Hermione, slowly letting go of her arm.

"Thanks," he grunted.

Hermione smirked. "Don't mention it. I'll do it enough for the both of us," she teased.

Ron snorted. He groaned, his head pounding between his ears from lack of sleep and an excess of coffee that he had to drink to combat his exhaustion. Hermione had gone through the same ordeal *and* was suffering from side-effects from the Abortion Potion, and she was a chipper as ever. Merlin, Ron hated her.

"I need to get a potion from the pharmacy or something because...*Merlin*. This is worse than a hangover," Ron muttered as they began to walk to the lobby. He glanced over his shoulder and frowned when neither Neville nor Harry came through. He shrugged, shaking his head. They'd show sooner or later—preferable sooner so McGonagall didn't berate their asses to hell.

"Oh, don't be such a baby, Ron," Hermione snorted.

"I'm not being a—"

"Hey, Ron!"

Ron winced and Hermione squeaked as Emmeline Vance squirmed her way between the two of them. Hermione raised an eyebrow as Emmeline looped her arm through Ron's and beamed up at him.

"How are you, Em?" Ron asked, his voice going nervously high.

"Well! I wanted to let you know our patient is doing great! If you want to check in on him, later, to see for yourself, it'd be okay," Emmeline said, her grin never faltering. She paused, turning her sunny smile onto Hermione. Her smile grew even wider, looking almost like a grimace. "Good morning...Granger, isn't it?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Good morning, Healer Vance," Hermione said. She looked behind Emmeline's head to shoot Ron a look and he shrugged, looking back at Emmeline.

"I'll definitely check in. Anything else, Em?" he asked.

Emmeline raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know I was interrupting anything," she teased.

"You weren't. We're just waiting for our housemates," Hermione said. Emmeline's head snapped around as if she hadn't expected Hermione to say anything.

She blinked and nodded. “Oh, of course. I’ll see you both later, I suppose. Later, Ron,” she finished and then she was flouncing away, her hair bouncing around her as her lime green robes flapped around her.

“Hmm,” Hermione hummed.

Ron flushed. “What?” he barked out, defensively.

“Did I say something, arsehole?" Hermione challenged, her eyes full of wicked humor. Ron's blush darkened and he was saved from responding as Neville jogged up to them, still stuffing files that he had taken home the night before into his satchel. "Neville, you're late."

“I am. I forgot these files. McGonagall would have my skin,” Neville said. He paused with a frown.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, curiously.

“Where’s Harry?” Neville asked. “He left before all of us, didn’t he?”

“No. I thought he was still upstairs…” Ron said.

Hermione bit her lower lip, and slowly pointed to the entrance. They all turned their intention to Harry.

“Um. There he is,” Hermione said.

“Oh...no…” Ron breathed.

Harry strode forward, painted into the tightest leather pants that any of them had ever seen. The V of his jumper was deep enough to expose his collarbone, showing off his skin. Harry’s lips were curled into a smirk as he strode forward, his clunky knee-high boots making his legs look even slimmer.

“Smile,” Neville snapped.

Hermione nodded, forcing a smile on. “Let’s go.”

The three joined Harry, surrounding him like a mob. Hermione hooked her arm through Harry’s. Harry looked down at her, smugness radiating from him.

“What are you doing?” Ron hissed.

“*Whore.*”

The slur made the three housemates freeze. Harry acted like he hadn’t heard it, continuing to stride forward. Hermione’s fists clenched and she took a step forward, her eyes on the matron that had *dared* to say anything. The matron flinched away towards her clique, turning her

eyes away. Though no one looked at them, it wasn't hard to tell that Harry was all anyone was talking about. Hermione glanced at her best friend.

Harry was *reveling* in it all.

"I'm what they want me to be," Harry said with a vicious grin. "They want a homewrecking, broken whore? I'm the homewrecking, broken *whore.*"

DIAGNOSIS

Harry strode into the trainee room, head held high. He pretended that the room didn't fall silent when he entered. He glanced over at Padma and Smith. They were watching him, unabashedly, curiosity and irritation in their eyes.

"What?" he drawled.

"Someone's waiting for you. By your cupboard," Padma said, her voice stilted.

Harry tried to stop himself from stiffening. He clenched his teeth tight as he strode forward. He expected to see Tom, probably begging to speak with him again. Except, no, that wasn't in Tom's nature. Perhaps, it was Dumbledore, ready to sack him for shagging a superior. It couldn't be McGonagall. They wouldn't have phrased it like that.

The reality was so much worse than imagination.

"You're not on my service today. What a pity," Bellatrix drawled, leaning against the wall. Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring her in favor of pulling his jumper over his head. She began to drum her sharp nails against the nearby cupboard. "I requested you, but you'd already been snapped. Right. Up. Maybe you *are* as good as you say you are."

"I am," Harry snapped. He shook his head, chastising himself for even responding.

Bellatrix beamed, having won that round. "Well, then. I haven't seen much of yet, but clearly, someone *else* sees promise in you."

"Including your fiance," Ron grumbled his breath.

Both Harry and Bellatrix's head shot up and they swung two glowers at him. Ron turned a patchy pink that only emphasize his freckles and he stuck his head deeper into the cupboard. Bellatrix's playfulness melted away, leaving only nastiness.

"Yes, including *my* fiance," Bellatrix bit out, sneering at Harry. "Yeah, he saw all kinds of things in you. Talent, ambition...his *cock.*"

Harry swallowed, looking away. "Is there something you need, Mediwizard Black?"

Bellatrix huffed.

“It’s not fun bullying you if you don’t react,” Bellatrix pouted as she stared down at Harry.

Harry looked up at her. “Maybe that’s why I’m not reacting,” he said slowly.

Bellatrix huffed. “That’ll be all, Trainee Potter,” she snapped before she stormed out, letting the door swing closed behind her.

The trainee room burst into sound again, full of gossip. Harry deflated, his confidence from earlier deflating and he leaned back against his cupboard as he pulled him hunter green robes on, forlornly. Hermione frowned up at him, pressing her hand against his jaw, gently.

“Harry...she’s a bitch. Don’t let her get to you,” Hermione said, earnestly.

“It’s...fuck both of them. Honestly,” Neville added.

Harry gave a sad smile. “Yeah. Fuck both of them,” he whispered, his voice cracking. He wasn’t going to cry, he told himself. There wasn’t anything left to cry out.

He had danced it out all night, drowned in Firewhiskey, and then had pulled himself together. He had downed a Hangover Potion and then told himself that he was the best because he *was* the best. It was just the same as when he had pulled himself together after his confrontation with Lily. And maybe, he was a little more scarred, and a little more bitter, but he was walking and he was almost whole, and he would be okay.

He was going to be alright.

“Yeah. You’re going to be alright,” Ron promised.

Harry flinched. He hadn't realized he'd been speaking out loud. He shook himself, pressing a smirk to his face as he ruffled his hair.

“Okay, let’s go, then. We’re going to be alright.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Potter...Granger, you’re on my service today. Come along,” Emmeline Vance said cheerfully.

She started power walking down the hall before Harry and Hermione could even register what she was saying. The two walked after her, leaving a respectable distance between them so they could maintain some semblance of privacy.

“How are you holding up?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged, staring down at the papers on the case. It was quite barebones. And he hadn't taken Care for Magical Creatures—at least, not after his sixth year. He had no idea what a Spectre was.

"I'll be fine. I...I haven't seen him," Harry muttered.

"Do you really want to?" Hermione challenged.

Harry looked up from his papers. "I'll let you know when I see him."

"Granger! Hurry up!" Vance shouted over his shoulder. "Oh, you too, Potter!"

Hermione looked amused and she put more power into her walk. Harry glanced at her, but Hermione seemed deep in thought as they turned the next corridor on the Creature-Induced Injuries floor. Vance turned into a room and they followed, hovering in the doorway. Harry's eyes widened when he saw.

"Oh," he whispered.

Vance raised an eyebrow at him before she turned back to the patient. The patient was the color of parchment, so pale that they could see the blue of her veins, with vivid red bruises around her eyes and mouth. Her hands were wrapped in gossamer-like bandages, with long sharp talons jutting out like a creature. Harry supposed that she *was* a creature, now.

"Granger. Potter. This is Elizabeth Bath, and *she* is a Spectre," Vance said, firmly. "Can either of you tell me what a Spectre is?"

Hermione's hand punched through the air. Vance stared at Harry for thirty seconds too long before she turned to Hermione and nodded once.

"A Spectre is a creature created when a vampire drains a human almost until death and then given only a small amount of vampire blood. This means that the vampire venom necessary isn't present during transformation, hindering the person," Hermione rattled off as if she were reciting from a textbook.

Vance looked grudgingly impressed. "Good, Granger," she said shortly before she turned to Elizabeth Bath. "How are you doing, Miss Bath?"

"Liza, Emmeline. It's not like we haven't been friends for years," the Spectre corrected. Her voice was a creaky whisper, like the sound of paper rubbing against paper. Her red eyes were so dissimilar to Tom's burgundy eyes. The Spectre's eyes made Harry cringe.

"How are you doing, Elizabeth?" Vance asked warmly.

"Thirsty," Elizabeth drawled in her whispery voice.

"Can either of you tell me what she's thirsty for?" Vance asked.

"Uh, blood," Harry volunteered, never tearing his eyes away from Elizabeth. The patient seemed to curl away from his gaze. Harry swallowed. "Oh, please don't do that."

“Do what?” Elizabeth rasped.

“Uh. That. I’m not staring at you because you’re…”

“Ugly?” Elizabeth challenged.

Harry shook his head. “No. You’re...extraordinary. I’ve never heard of anything like you,” Harry said, honestly.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened.

"Okay, so Elizabeth is recovering from her transformation. Prior to this transformation, she was a Muggle so she's struggling to adjust," Vance said, carefully. "She has daily appointments with Head Healer Dumbledore and is sustained by blood—both human and vampire. She is also going to be the subject of my project if she finds that agreeable."

Vance finished with a small grin.

Elizabeth shifted, shrugging slowly. “I mean...you’re my only friend here...so…”

“We lived in the same building,” Vance explained. “It’s how I found her. Now, you need to keep her as comfortable as possible, Potter. This is a very painful state and while I research a way to transform her fully into a vampire, it’ll take some time. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Harry said, immediately.

“What can I do?” Hermione asked, curiously.

Vance blinked, eyes wide. “Oh...I have paperwork you can do after you familiarize Potter on the subjects of Spectres. Meet me in my office.”

Hermione grinned. “Sure.”

Vance nodded and then looked over at Elizabeth. She strode forward, grabbing her talon-like hand.

“Don’t worry, honey. You’ll be alright in their hands,” Vance assured her. Elizabeth nodded, like a skittish bunny and then Vance was brushing out of the room without a look back.

Harry glanced over at Hermione. Hermione was beaming.

“She *hates* me,” Hermione said, delighted.

Elizabeth snorted and both trainees’ heads snapped around to look at her. “Em doesn't hate anybody," she hissed. Then, she faltered. "She's just...dismissive."

“Hermione…” Harry said, warningly.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m looking forward to this,” Hermione laughed. She sat down at Elizabeth’s side and looked at her with wide eyes. “How are you adjusting to the wizarding

world, Miss Bath?"

"It's...a lot," Elizabeth said, softly. "I can't believe Em has been *hiding* all of this. Witches and wizards and vampires and giants and werewolves. There are werewolves right?"

Harry smiled, warmly. "I guess you'll be teaching both of us, won't you, Hermione?"

"I guess, I will," Hermione said decidedly. "Now, let's start with vampires and we'll work our way through. You know what a vampire is, I assume, Miss Bath?"

DIAGNOSIS

Tom's gaze was far away as Luna Lovegood wrapped up her project pitch on Nargles and its effect on children. It had been long and involved a few too many group activities—though Dumbledore seemed to appreciate that, unlike anyone else—but it had been clever, especially partnering with Vance and the Creature Induced-Injuries floor. At least, Vance was clever. It gave her two chances at the grant. Really, it should be considered cheating.

Only because Tom hadn't come up with that idea himself.

Everyone was stiff competition and as ambitious as Tom himself. Vance had proposed transforming a Spectre into a fully-fledged vampire. McGonagall had wanted to research partially-transformed Animagi to evaluate if it had to do with a mental block or magical block. It had been a nice touch, involving Dumbledore's specialty.

Snape's project had been in pursuit of his and Lily's common goal of the panacea, with dragon blood, this time. That would be intriguing if it were fully realized.

Even Sprout had come forth with an interesting idea, though Tom couldn't quite recall what it was. Well, it must've been interesting if he even remembered that Sprout had proposed something at all.

Tom jerked, applauding carefully as Luna finished up with a flourishing curtsey.

"How positively fascinating! Thank you, everyone, for presenting. I look forward to reading each of your files in depth—" Dumbledore said, cheerfully.

Snape cleared his throat, interrupting. "What about Riddle?"

Everyone slowly turned their heads to glower at Tom. Tom leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of his tea, daring anyone else to comment. McGonagall's lips curled into a sneer, but Tom wasn't sure if that had to do with her heartbroken trainee or with his generally unpleasant disposition. He wouldn't be shocked to know that it was both.

"Tom's project was presented in private yesterday," Dumbledore said, carefully.

“Why does he get a private session?” Snape demanded.

Tom scoffed. "Because my project needed at least six permit applications and needs not only Dumbledore's permission, but the Department of Mysteries'. If you'd like to make an Unbreakable Vow, I'd *gladly* tell you all about the fruits of my brilliance.”

Snape’s sallow cheeks burned a ruddy, revolting pink.

“That won’t be necessary,” he spat.

Tom smirked, rolling his eyes.

“If it helps, I didn’t want to be here, but Dumbledore insisted on grounds of moral support,” Tom said, cruelly. He leaned forward, eyes sharp. “Out of curiosity, did any of you feel particularly supported me?”

Only Luna raised her hand, smiling brightly.

“I did!”

“You’re daft,” Sprout muttered under her breath.

“At least I can remember her project. Nargles. Disgusting children. Effects. Was I right?” Tom retorted. Luna nodded, her beam never leaving her face. Tom stood up and look down at Dumbledore, anger still brewing in his burgundy eyes. “Dismissed?”

Dumbledore sighed, like the tired old man he was.

“Everyone is dismissed. You will receive my decision by the 24th of December,” Dumbledore said.

Tom nodded. What a wonderful Christmas gift that would be. He looked forward to it.

He didn't wait for any of the other Healers to move, half out of the door before Snape could stand. He already knew that Snape would probably complain to Dumbledore about Tom's ‘special treatment' even though he already had everything that Tom had except perhaps his looks. Tom had made one error in Dumbledore's eyes had practically disgraced himself. At least, now he knew that his work would win the grant because he *deserved* it, even after Bellatrix’s stupid bitch ass destroying his preliminary work.

The Department Head of Spell Damage paused as he walked up the hallway as he stared at the young man he'd wanted to see all day.

Harry.

He took a step forward, only stopping when a thin, tall body slid neatly in front of him.

“Turn around. Walk away,” McGonagall said, warningly.

Tom’s eyes narrowed as he peered over McGonagall’s shoulder at Harry. Harry hadn’t even seemed to notice him, head bent down as he scribbled out his notes, leaning against the window. He was so beautiful, even in those atrocious hunter green robes. That furrowed brow. Tom remembered that when Harry would bring home files, his quill tucked between his lips. Just as he thought that, Harry tapped the end of his quill against his lips.

Yes, Harry hadn’t changed so much since their falling out.

“From what?” Tom challenged.

“From my trainee,” McGonagall snapped.

Tom scoffed. “Well, I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were,” McGonagall corrected. She crossed her arms and lifted her chin, powerful and challenging. She was Tom’s elder in that moment, instead of his subordinate. “Tom, you can’t do this. You don’t have the right. Not anymore.”

With those words, Tom deflated. He stared at McGonagall with flat eyes, devoid of emotion. It was enough to tell McGonagall about the mess of his mind.

“I just want to know if he’s okay,” Tom said, softly.

“No, he’s not,” McGonagall sighed. “He’s a Quidditch accident, bloody, broken bodies, and splintered brooms, and everyone is slowing down to watch the wreckage. He's doing the best he can by pretending that he embraces what they're saying, but you can't help him now. You'll only make it worse."

"What am I supposed to do, then?" he snarled, stealing another glance at Harry.

McGonagall took another step forward, her eyes narrowing behind her glasses.

“Go away. Leave him to heal. Without *you.*”

DIAGNOSIS

“So, Hermione and I have a Spectre,” Harry announced as soon as the pair of them sat down at their unusual lunch table. Ron’s mouth popped open and he leaned forward.

“You’re *joking*.”

“No, we are not. She was a Muggle and is now a Spectre because of some arsehole vampire that couldn’t deal with the responsibility of an actual fledgling. Poor thing,” Hermione muttered as she rearranged her food on her tray, unhappy with how some of the food was touching. She was always a stickler for things like that.

“Wow. That’s mad, innit?” Ron murmured to himself. He looked over at Neville.

Neville shrugged. “I don’t know what a Spectre is.”

“Neither did I. She’s a sweetheart, though,” Harry said.

“I could sell tickets for people to see something like that,” Ron murmured to himself, shaking his head. “Do you know how much money I’d make?”

“Ron…” Harry warned.

Harry pretended not to notice them staring even though they sat at the same table as him. He reached for Hermione’s chips and she smacked his hand.

Ron looked delighted. “Yes…” he hissed, grinning.

“Wait. What? I can’t have your chips?” Harry asked, appalled.

“No. I want them today,” Hermione said.

Ron was practically bouncing in his chair. “*Yes.*”

“You can’t just *decide* you want to eat your chips. We have an accord!” Harry snapped and Hermione looked at him, amused as she slowly lifted a chip to her mouth and took a bite out of it. Harry sneered. “Guess what? No take-away for *you* tonight.”

“It’s my night to order and I will *gladly* order take-away for you. You can even pick,” Ron laughed.

Harry rudely flipped him the bird. Neville rolled his eyes.

“You’re all children,” he grumbled as he looked through his Hogwarts Herbology notes.

Smith made a squawking noise and the four looked over at him.

“What, Smith?” Harry barked.

“You’re all...you can’t...he slept with *Riddle*!” Smith sputtered.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Yes, I think everyone knows that by now.”

“But, you’re not angry at him? For...sleeping with a superior?” Padma asked. She leaned forward, staring into Hermione’s eyes. “I mean...I thought you would be. I get you. You’re driven and you work hard and he just sleeps with a superior and gets the best procedures. Doesn’t that bother you?”

Harry rolled his eyes, even as Hermione, Ron, and Neville stiffened at the accusations.

“You don’t ‘get’ me at all,” Hermione snarled. “Harry’s just as driven and he works just as hard. He gets the best Spell Damage procedures because he’s the best Spell Damage trainee, Patil.”

“I thought you would’ve claimed that title,” Neville said with a grin.

Hermione whipped her head around to stare at Neville, her anger draining away. "Oh, actually, I meant to tell you all, but I've been reconsidering my specialty."

“Interesting. Why?” Ron asked, curiously.

“Well, I—”

“Enough. How are you not angry?” Smith demanded. “I’m annoyed.”

“Annoyed that my milkshake brings all the boys to the yard?” Harry asked. There was a long moment of silence when everyone just stared at him. Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. “Sorry...my godfather really likes Muggle music.”

“It’s not fair,” Smith snapped.

Harry leaned back, regarding Smith for a long moment.

“Life’s not fair. I’ve learned a lot about that in the past 72 hours, Smith. So. Get over yourself,” he spat and Smith flinched.

There was a long moment of awkward silence. Hermione looked between the two, caught between worry and amusement.

“Um...we’ve got work to do Smith?” Ron asked.

Smith swallowed. “You haven’t finished your lunch,” he pointed out.

“Mate, I’m trying to save you from certain death. Let’s *go*,” Ron said, pointedly. He stood up, pulling up his tray. He swooped down, pressing kisses to the middle of Harry and Neville’s heads. They squawked, swatting at him as he laughed. He hesitated over Hermione’s head before he did the same, pressing a quick kiss.

Hermione spun, landing her fist in Ron’s stomach. Ron grunted though he grinned through the pain.

“Get away from me, swine,” she hissed, grinning viciously.

“Later, hag,” Ron said as he sauntered away, Smith slinking after him.

Padma sighed. “I...I’m sorry for prying. That was really rude,” Padma murmured.

“It’s not fine, but I accept your apology,” Harry said, nearly immediately.

Padma gave a weak little smile and nodded, looking down at her plate. She glanced over at the Department Heads' table. Luna Lovegood was regaling them all with a tale, Emmeline Vance sitting just next to her. But, nobody seemed to be listening to her. They were all trying to sneak covert looks at Harry and company.

“They’re all children, aren’t they?” Hannah whispered, softly. She had noticed too.

Padma swallowed. It made her feel a little better. Not much. But, a little.

Harry finished his soup in silence. He stood up and glanced over at Hermione. “I’m going to head up to the library to read more about Spectres. Are you coming?” he asked.

Hermione started to nod before Neville shot her a look. She shook her head even as Harry stared at her, brow furrowed. "I'll catch up," Hermione said.

Harry shrugged. It was better to interrogate her later. He would get more out of her when it was just the two of them. He started walking towards the door, getting rid of his tray by the trash bins behind the doors. He jumped when he felt a hand fall on his shoulder and he spun around.

“Oh, Neville. I didn’t know you were leaving too,” Harry said.

Neville flushed. “I...was deciding if I was going to,” he muttered.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Deciding? You didn’t want to hang out with Hannah more?” he asked.

“I...Hannah and I have a date tonight. It’s fine,” Neville said, pointedly. He gestured towards the door and Harry raised an eyebrow though he left as Neville bid. “I want to talk to you. Let’s do this in the stairwell.”

Harry forced a laugh. “Oooh, sounds *illicit*.”

Neville’s cheeks burned bright pink. “Please, Harry.”

"Oh, shit. Is it really illicit?" Harry asked, deadpanning as if he followed Neville into the stairwell. Neville looked up and down before he pressed his back against the door, keeping anyone from walking into the conversation.

Harry frowned. Neville was nervous, his cheeks still a splotchy pink and he wasn’t making eye contact. Every few moments he would open his mouth and then shut it with an audible, and rather painful-sounding, click.

“Neville...what’s going on?” Harry asked, slowly.

“I like you,” Neville blurted out. “And before you ask. I *like* you.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Oh. Neville, I…”

“But, it’s okay. I’ve been told it’s okay to have a crush on someone while being in a sorta relationship as I long as I don’t act on it. Or Ron said something like that. Anyway, I just wanted you to know,” Neville said, firmly. He watched Harry, waiting for his reaction, but Harry still seemed to be processing. He rocked from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again as Harry’s expressions shifted at least ten times.

“I...see…” Harry breathed, soft and fluttery.

Neville reared back. He’d heard something like this from Harry. Whenever Riddle had slept over and Harry flirted, smiling sweetly as he made them eggs. Riddle complained about them every day, and he dutifully ate them all, even though everyone knew that Harry was horrid at anything that wasn’t toast or a salad.

“Harry,” Neville warned.

“Neville,” Harry teased, playfully. He leaned forward, pressing a hand against Neville’s chest. “Ron wasn’t wrong you know. It’s okay to—”

“He wasn’t wrong,” Neville said, sharply. “But, that doesn’t make this okay.”

Harry breathed in sharply, his flirtatious expression freezing on his face. He didn’t move his gaze from Neville’s collarbone, his green eyes empty.

Neither noticed the man watching from one landing above.

“It’s not. Don’t you want me?” Harry whispered, his voice cracking.

Neither noticed the man disappearing.

“Flirting with me doesn’t suit you, Harry. You’re better than that,” Neville said, and he sounded so disappointed that Harry flinched away like he’d been burned, tearing his gaze away.

Harry let out a watery laugh. “I’m...I’m sorry. That was...inappropriate. I...oh, I don’t—”

“Please, Harry,” Neville whispered.

Harry fell silent. “Sorry,” he repeated.

"You're a Healer. Focus on being a Healer. I told you because I wanted you to know that you are worthy of affection and love and that you're not too broken. You're brilliant and beautiful and deserve so much better than the shit that's happening to you," Neville said, firmly. He looked at Harry, raising up his hand to bump his chin playfully. Harry's lips twitched into a small smile.

“Thanks...thanks, Neville.” And then, he flushed awkwardly, eyes narrowing. “We won’t ever speak of this again. Got it?”

Neville snorted. “Got it.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry looked down at his notes, keeping his basket of human blood and vampire blood close to his chest. Elizabeth would probably be awake now. Her room was kept dark so that she would be able to sleep anytime, but she seemed to get tired faster than a normal vampire would, and maintained pretty human-like levels of agility and speed if Vance's notes were correct. He had no doubt that they were.

“Hey.”

Harry looked up from his work and smiled over at Hermione. “Hey. I thought you’d be with Vance. Paperwork.”

“I finished it. She tried so hard not to be infuriated by it,” Hermione said with a grin. “I’ve been wondering...why she doesn’t like me. I think it has to do with Ron.”

“Ron?” Harry asked with a snort. “Really?”

“Yeah, I think she has feelings for him. But, that has nothing to do with me,” Hermione said with a shrug as they strolled down the ward corridor towards Elizabeth Bath’s room.

“Doesn’t it?” Harry asked, a teasing sing-song tone to his voice.

Hermione did a double take. “Excuse me?”

“You flirt with each other. A lot.”

“He calls me a mad woman and a hag!” Hermione protested.

Harry smirked. “And you call him a bastard and an arse. I bet you two would have the most glorious violent sex that I’ve—”

“Please!” Hermione squawked. She rounded on Harry, but suddenly, her expression shifted. She tilted her head, eyes narrowed in bewilderment. “What’s that noise?”

Harry frowned. He listened hard as well. It sounded like a swell of people, all arguing and talking over one another. Harry crept forward and a terribly sick feeling of dread rose from his belly. He stalked around the corner and swallowed hard when he saw the people overflowing from Elizabeth Bath’s room. Hermione gasped, softly, her eyes wide.

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione sighed, softly.

Harry stalked forward, rage replacing that dread as he shouldered his way past the trainees and Healers attempting to peek inside. Hannah Abbott and Padma Patil were both standing on either side of Elizabeth, shouting questions at her that the young Spectre shied away from, her red eyes wide with terror. She looked faint, ashen rather than just pale.

“I can accept two more, standing room. A Galleon each,” a familiarly snide voice said.

“That’s too much!”

“This ain’t a charity,” Ron drawled. “We’ve all got bills to pay.”

“What’s going on in here?” Harry shouted.

The entire room fell silent and turned to him. He felt the weight of their judgment as they realized who he was. Ron and Smith looked at one another, nervous suddenly. Harry’s eyes narrowed on the two of them and he pointed at them, slowly.

“His idea!” Smith said, pushing Ron forward.

"Well, it was a stray idea. You really brought it to fruition. So, really, it was all you. Congrats," Ron said, shoving at Smith.

“Enough! This isn’t a zoo!” Harry shouted. “Everyone *out*! Abbott, Patil, get *away* from my patient!”

He shoved himself through the bodies of trainees, matrons, and junior Healers that crowded the bed, pulling his wand on all of them as he settled himself at Elizabeth Bath’s side. She looked up at him with wide, shiny eyes, and he knew that if she could cry, she would be. He trembled with both sympathy and rage, the end of his wand shooting dangerous sparks.

“This woman is a patient! Who is sick and tired of being stared at!” Harry roared. He turned back to glower at all of them. “Out! Out!”

Slowly, they drained away. Ron looked frightened by Harry’s fury, which only made Harry angrier.

“You know you’re all a bunch of gossips! Why don’t you point and stare at me! ‘Look at Harry! Isn’t he sad and pathetic and heartbroken? Maybe he’s gone mad’. Maybe I have! But, leave Miss Bath *alone,*” Harry said. He spun on Ron and Smith, pointing at both of them again, shaking with rage. “You two should be ashamed of yourselves.”

He began to bodily shove the spectators out when they didn’t move fast enough for him, and when the room was finally drained of visitors, he turned back to Hermione who was silent by the door. He shoved the basket at her.

“Please just...please help Miss Bath with her meal. I need a moment,” Harry whispered.

Hermione nodded. “Of course, Harry.”

Harry shut the door behind him and collapsed against it, his hand over his eyes. He only let it fall away when he felt their presences lingering, all peering at him, waiting for him to blow. Harry looked up and was immediately caught in a burgundy gaze.

Tom stared at him, searching with concern on his face.

Harry’s lips curled into a sneer. “And what are *you* looking at?”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry huffed as he pressed his head into his cupboard and tried to stop himself from screaming. The day had been long and frustrating. Hermione had tried to placate the patient after the whole debacle of treating her like a zoo, but Elizabeth had rightfully complained to Vance, which got Harry a dressing down that he would be feeling for weeks. Really, Vance had placed a little too much blame on Hermione, but once again, Hermione had braved it like a champ, even basking in Vance's rage. McGonagall had reprimanded Ron, though, so that had balanced out.

Ron would be on scut for a week, being her paperwork bitch, mostly, and then at the pharmacy for another. Apparently, Smith would be doing the same. At least, Smith complained about it. Ron had accepted his punishment gracefully, and Harry had a feeling that Hermione and he would be getting their favorite homemade recipe—a delightful roast chicken and mashed potatoes that Mrs. Weasley had taught to him.

Harry sighed, pulling his rather showy jumper over his head and he hated himself, suddenly. He had tried so hard to pretend that he didn't care, and all day, he had fucking *cared*. Even his outfit choice showed how much he cared by pretending that he didn't care. He was a fucking joke.

Harry pulled away from his cupboard, grabbing his bag and tossing it over his shoulder.

"I'll meet you in the Apparation Zone," Harry called over his shoulder.

Hermione hummed her agreement.

"I'll see you later tonight. Going to dinner with Hannah," Neville reminded him. Harry nodded and gave a short salute, a soft smile on his face. Neville smiled back, just as sweetly.

Harry huffed. Neville Longbottom had a crush on him. The idea made him grin. He'd never thought that someone sweet like Neville could like *him.* Harry attracted arrogant assholes that liked to stroke their own egos by fucking pretty boys like Harry—Riddle being a prime example of that. Neville liking him meant that Harry could attract nice boys. Sweet boys.

If he wanted to. When he wanted to. If. When.

Harry sighed, shaking his head. He took the deserted corridor that he always took. The shortcut. It would be better than being subjected to more stares. He knew that something else would pop up that would make everyone gossip about something else, that all he had to do was endure for a little while longer, but it was so hard. So hard.

"Harry."

Harry jerked to a stop. He looked to his right.

He hadn't noticed Tom standing there. Tom watched him, carefully, as if waiting for him to run. Well, then, Harry would surprise him.

He turned fully towards his *ex*-boyfriend. "Tom."

“Can we talk?” Tom asked.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing?” Harry sneered.

Tom looked at him with narrowed eyes, irritated. His jaw was tight. Harry felt a spiteful flash of victory. He wanted Tom to feel even a *fraction* of what he was feeling.

“It was real to me, you know. Whatever it was. It was real. I wasn’t playing any games. You liked to accuse me of playing games. But, I like you. You’re rude, beautiful, bitter, and talented. And you make the most horrid eggs and your coffee tastes like tar. And your tea is watery and always too sweet. But, I had it anyway,” Tom said.

And Harry knew that meant something. Something deeper than he wanted to dissect just then. He couldn’t do it. He was tired. So, very tired.

“Tom...I can’t…” Harry whispered.

“I saw you flirting with Longbottom,” Tom said, softly. Harry’s back stiffened. “It was rather half-hearted if you ask—”

Harry snapped.

“You don’t get to call me a whore,” Harry snarled.

Tom’s eyes widened. “I’m…”

“When I met you, I thought I met the person I was going to spend the rest of my life with. I was done. So all the boys, and all the bars, and all the obvious mommy issues...who cared, because I was done,” Harry hissed, pressed to the brink of his patience. “I’m gluing myself back together now. I make no apologies for how I choose to repair what you broke. You don’t get to call me a whore.”

Tom stared at him for a long time, at a loss. And then, he gave a terribly sad smile.

“I would never call you a whore.”

Harry faltered, taking a step back.

“No. You wouldn’t,” he whispered. Harry closed his eyes, wrapping his arms around his middle, holding himself together.

Tom watched the man and then looked over his shoulder. Bellatrix waited by the end of the corridor, her coat wrapped around her as she watched them. He could read the look in her eyes. She’d always been easy to read, unlike Harry. She was aching. It was in the way her eyes darted around wildly, the way her hands trembled. And Tom wanted to be *cruel*. He wanted to be petty.

He looked back at Harry and took a step forward, pressing his hands to Harry’s cheeks. Harry’s eyes flashed open, full of pain. And Tom couldn’t kiss him. He couldn’t do that. So,

instead, he pressed his lips to Harry's forehead, his burgundy eyes fluttering shut as he felt Harry's warm skin under his cheeks.

Tom pulled back and stepped away. Harry's lips were still parted, pretty and soft and pink.

"Good night, Harry." Tom swallowed. "I think...we both need time to think."

"You need time to think," Harry challenged.

Tom nodded. "I need time."

And he walked past Harry. He looked at Bellatrix, and he could see the devastation curling in the shadows of his eyes. The words were on his tongues. He could shatter her.

He kept walking.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry leaned forward at the kitchen table, basking in the scent of slowly roasting chicken. He looked over at the counter. Hermione was sitting up on it, having a half-assed conversation as she went over a book that she had unearthed from the library: *St. Mungo's, A History.* She already owned *Hogwarts, A History*, and she was practically squeaking her excitement. Ron looked like he wasn't paying her any mind, making mashed potatoes, but Harry knew better.

He'd keep his thoughts to himself on that one. They'd figure it out.

"Boxing Day, yeah?" Harry called.

Hermione looked up from her book, grinning. "Yes. Of course. We'll cook ourselves too. So, tell them to bring a wine or something."

"Wait, we have to make the whole dinner?" Ron demanded.

"Yes. We're the *hosts*. And it'll be a lot because your family and my family and Neville's parents and—"

"This sounds like more work than it should be. And you think I can tell my mum not to bring anything, you're crazy. She does what she likes. She'll probably tell me I'm too skinny even though I've gained at least a *stone.*"

Harry looked back down at his letter.

Hey Dad,

It's been a while, hasn't it? I'm sorry that I haven't been in touch. Training is a bit of a bitch. But, it's getting better. I'm reaching my six-month milestone in January. I'll be able to official pick a mentor and specialty when that happens. I won't tell you what it is now. I'll tell you over Christmas dinner.

Yes, about Christmas. I won't be spending it at home with you and Mum and everyone. I've found more family, and I think you'd like them. Hermione Granger. Ron Weasley. Neville Longbottom. I think you'd like them a lot. But, their families are far, and they don't have the best relationships either. So, I'll be spending Christmas with them. However, we all invite you to a dinner on Boxing Day. Don't worry about bringing but a nice Firewhiskey.

And my invite includes all of you. Mum, too. If she'll be home. If she wants. I don't know if she will.

I know, it seems rather sudden, but I feel very tired. I've been holding a lot in, and I'm just so tired of it all. Have you ever been so tired that you can't even sleep?

Anyway, I look forward to your reply.

Harry

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Cardi B is my everything. Give her a listen. I bring this up because every time Harry acts out, I'm listening to a Cardi B song, whether it's her songs or she features in it.

Also, next chapter is a doozy. It's...THE CHRISTMAS EPISODE/CHAPTER. It's close enough to Christmas that I don't feel bad about it.

ALSO: I'm so close to 1000 KUDOS!!! Thank you so much, y'all! I really, really appreciate it. You guys are just amazing. Thanks for reading!

EDIT (citations):

Spectre / Incomplete Vampire - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/143812628894/spectres-or-incomplete-vampires-spectres-are

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Happy almost Christmas.”

The four housemates stood in front of their sad, scrawny tree, welling with pride and a sort of dismay. It was a tiny little thing, easily dwarfed by even Hermione—the shortest of the group, with a few cheap baubles hanging from it, already chipped from its day-long wear. They hadn’t even been able to find a proper star so late. Instead, Ron had made a three-dimensional star out of parchment that was a little wrinkly and stained at the edges because Neville had spilled tea on it.

“This is so depressing,” Harry sighed, looking down at it.

Neville snorted. “Then, it fits our aesthetic,” he said.

"Too right," Ron agreed. He turned to his friends and crossed his arms. "Do we really have to go to work?"

“We’re lucky that we aren’t Patil, Abbott, and Smith. They have to work tomorrow on Christmas. Only a half-day, but still atrocious,” Hermione pointed out.

Ron nodded, sagely.

“I’d rather be at the hospital,” Harry said glumly.

Hermione hummed, nodding in agreement. Then, she paused, glancing over at Harry.

“You get pharmacy today, so no you don’t,” Hermione said.

Harry gaped. “Why am I on desk duty?” he demanded.

“Because you decided to go to a bar and get hungover last week instead of making dinner, so I covered for you,” Hermione said. She smirked at Harry’s outrage and pat his cheek. Harry sneered, smacking her hand away. “Don’t worry. You can have my chips for lunch.”

“Outstanding,” Harry said with a tiny smirk.

Neville tilted his head. “Imagine...our families are going to be here. And we’re going to cook terrible food for them and show them our tiny, stupid tree and…”

“They’re going to know we’re frauds,” Ron squawked. “My mother’s going to demand that I move back home.”

“No!” Harry said, stomping his foot. He turned on his friends, his eyes blazing. “No. We’re not frauds. We are dark and twisty and proud! We’re proud of our tiny little tree and our dark

house and our fucked up lives."

"I mean, *you're* dark and twisty—" Ron began.

"No. We're a family. We're dark and twisty together or not at all," Harry argued.

Hermione snorted. "No way that he's not dark and twisty."

"No way that *you're* not dark and twisty," Neville pointed out.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Okay. We get it. We're all fucked up. Now, let's get the fuck to work. I'm too tired for this shit."

"It's almost noon," Hermione sighed as she led them towards the door, ready to Apparate.

"Yeah, well we just had an overnight shift. Excuse me for wanting to fucking *die.*"

"Go right ahead," Hermione said, smirking over her shoulder.

Neither noticed the gleeful looks that Neville and Harry exchanged.

Ron grinned. "Oh, you *hag*."

DIAGNOSIS

Tom cleared his throat, straightening his robes as he gathered himself. He fought to keep his smugness off his face as he knocked and then opened the door. He stepped into the office that he hadn't been in in months, and fell a wave of triumph rise up in him as he looked at Dumbledore and a familiar older man.

"Tom, my boy, come in," Dumbledore said, beckoning him forward. He was beaming, his bright blue eyes sparkling with pride.

Tom cleared his throat, shutting it behind him and he walked forward, hand held out.

"Cygnus. It's a pleasure to see you again," Tom said, charmingly as he grasped Cygnus Black's hand, giving it a firm shake. Cygnus never smiled—it wasn't in his nature—but he seemed vaguely pleased, as he always did.

"Same to you, Healer Riddle. Please sit," Cygnus urged. He sat down in the overstuffed leather armchair next to Dumbledore's and waved at the smaller chair in front of the desk.

Tom sat down, hands clasped in his lap as he repressed the urge to vibrate in his seat. He glanced over at Dumbledore and the man was trying to hide his grin behind his vibrant crimson and emerald robes, but couldn't quite manage it. Tom lifted his chin in triumph.

“Tom...I’m sure you know why we’ve requested your presence this afternoon,” Dumbledore said.

Tom raised an eyebrow. “I can imagine why.”

"Your proposal was...groundbreaking, in short," Cygnus began. "Though I am only a humble businessman, I have been on the Board of St. Mungo's for upwards 40 years, and I have very rarely seen anything on the level of your work. The only one that, perhaps, surpasses you, is Lily Evans herself."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. Rather, ruefully, he admitted, "Tom, my boy, you rival me in all ways, and surpass me in others. You are truly in another class in your field."

Tom smirked, accepting the praise heaped upon him.

“You’ve submitted for the Gorsemoor Grant before,” Cygnus observed.

“I have,” Tom said, his lips curling into a sneer as he was reminded of his two prior rejections. If he really thought about it, he knew that neither of his proposals had been on the caliber of his current projects—both just seeds of inspiration that had cultivated into the grand idea that he had now.

“They were all fledgling ideas compared to this. And so, with that in mind, I am proud to present, on behalf of the Board and the Black family, the Gorsemoor Grant of 100,000 galleons,” Cygnus said and he slid over that glorious check, his name scrawled across the bottom.

Tom slowly reached for it, afraid that it would disappear before he could get his hands on it. Slowly, Tom looked over at Dumbledore.

“The Department of Mysteries really approved it?” Tom asked.

“On the basis that you have explicit and complete consent from participants, and that if there are any...casualties, you send the failed attempts to them,” Dumbledore allowed.

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “But, will I still have access to the bodies?”

“Absolutely. You’ll be given special access until the completion of your project,” Cygnus said, firmly. Tom nodded as he leaned back, snatching the check and holding it in hands.

“How many assistants am I allowed?” Tom asked.

He already knew how many he wanted.

"One," Dumbledore said, and now, he looked suspicious. "Your grant is provided for the main project. To pay an assistant overtime will have to come from department funds if you have a surplus."

"Of course, I have a surplus," Tom scoffed. He was good at finding money when he needed to, and he ran his department like a ship. Everyone used supplies sparingly, and there wasn't

any need for flashiness unless it was his own showing off.

“Good, good,” Cygnus said. “We’ll send over the extra paperwork and final signatures from the Department of Mysteries, the Ministry of Magic research committee, and the Committee on Experimental Charms. You’ll file everything with the Office of Permits by December 31st.”

“Understood. Thank you so much for the opportunity, Cygnus,” Tom said, nodding once. He stood and stowed his check in his robes before holding his hand out towards Cygnus. The man took it, shaking it once.

Despite him not knowing it, Tom had dismissed the older man. Cygnus strode from the room, his back straight as a rod, and with a quality of misplaced smugness that only money could buy. Tom waited until the door clicked shut behind the Board member before he allowed all of that charm to melt away, leaving only chilliness in his eyes.

Dumbledore gave a small smile.

“I hope this means I am somewhat forgiven,” Dumbledore began.

Tom sneered. “I got this on my own merit. Don’t pretend that it was for anything else.”

To his surprise, the old man nodded and sighed, suddenly looking older than he usually did. It only made him look twice as ridiculous in his garish robes.

“You are right, Tom. Please...forgive an old man for his meddling,” Dumbledore said, quietly. “I was worried. For your welfare, primarily, make no mistake about it. You say that you are not my son, but I cannot help it if I see you *as* my child. I remember when you were just a child...when you first came to St. Mungo’s. You were only fourteen.”

“I broke my fucking arm in an ill-fought duel,” Tom retorted. “And you were the jackass that decided to treat me even though you’re a *Mind Healer*.”

"And yet, I treated you because you were fascinating, even then. You told me that you knew you were special and that you were going to be the best Healer at St. Mungo's, even though I could tell you were terrified," Dumbledore chuckled. Tom sneered and immediately flipped the older man the bird. "I congratulate you, Tom. And I'm proud of you."

Tom shifted, suddenly uncomfortable with the older man’s praise. He brushed it away and shook his head, looking away even as Dumbledore continued to *smile* at him. He tried to sneer, but couldn’t quite muster the disdain that he wanted to.

“Whatever, old man,” Tom muttered before he turned away, stalking out before Dumbledore could say another encouraging or kind word. There was only so much emotion he could deal with from Dumbledore.

He shut the door behind him and pulled out the grant again, staring down at the check with trepidation and pride.

“Congrats.”

Tom looked up, eyes narrowed as he stared at the woman standing opposite from him. Bellatrix looked strangely subdued, her plague mask between her hands as she picked at the ribbon, fraying the ends. Her hair was slightly oily and there was a spot of dried blood on her cheek—so she had been there all night. It had probably been another Auror mission gone wrong. She *was* in charge of Auror Moody and anything else that had to do with the supposed terrorist group.

“Thank you,” Tom said, stiffly. “What do you want?”

“I’m not sure,” Bellatrix admitted. “My father was up here. I said hello. He was so very pleased to award the grant to you. He said…that I was good to marry a Healer of your caliber. That our children would be quite talented.”

“So, he doesn’t know what type of bitch you are, yet? Shocking,” Tom drawled, leaning back against Dumbledore’s door, stowing away his check with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ve never loved anyone like I love you, Tom Riddle,” Bellatrix said, quietly. She looked over at him, hoping for a reaction that would never come. “And I thought you loved me too.”

“I was fond of you,” Tom said, generously.

Bellatrix scoffed. “Yes. ‘Fond’. After all, I’ve seen what Tom Riddle looks like when he’s in love,” Bellatrix said, bitterly. She took a step forward, looking at him with narrowed eyes. “I know why you didn’t leave me.”

“Why?” Tom challenged.

“Because of this. You know you needed me. For your work. You still need me. My last name is on those checks. Daddy is on the Board, and...your work always mattered more than me,” Bellatrix said. She looked like she had cried all of her tears. Tom tilted his head. “We’re finished.”

“Good,” Tom spat.

Bellatrix held up her finger. “But, I’m not making this easy for you, lover. You want this grant, you can have it. I’ll make sure that you get everything you need for this stupid project. On *one* condition.”

“Name it.”

“You *can’t* have him.”

Tom paused. “What?” he whispered.

His mind had never been so quiet as he looked at his ex-fiance. She looked back at him, her gaze so carefully serious that he knew that she hadn’t been joking.

“You don’t *get* your happily ever after, Tom. Not if I don't. The evil villainess is slain. You get your project. You get the grant and you get the glory. But, you don't get the boy," Bellatrix whispered. She took another step towards him.

“You don’t get a say in that,” Tom snarled though his fingers started to shake.

“I do. I won’t bother him. I won’t even tease him. You get the grant. You get your glory. But you don’t *get* the boy.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Harry.”

Harry huffed. He *hated* being trapped at the pharmacy because it meant he couldn’t escape from unwanted conversations. There was literally no one he wanted to talk to less than Tom Marvolo Riddle. Harry pursed his lips.

“What is it, Tom?” Harry asked.

Tom’s burgundy eyes were bright with excitement. He was clutching a file close to his chest and he pressed it down to the counter. Harry glanced down in confusion and back up into Tom’s eyes.

“I won the Gorsemoor Grant,” Tom said. “I won!”

Harry let the sad smile spread across his lips. “Congratulations,” Harry murmured.

Tom swallowed.

"I...I won and you were the first person I wanted to tell," Tom said hesitantly.

And Harry froze. This was the first time that he had spoken to Tom in weeks that he hadn’t felt rage fill him. Instead, he remembered a night in a flat where he was sitting on a counter, and Tom had kissed a truth on his lips. He remembered nights spent in beds and mornings in his kitchen, cooking subpar eggs. He remembered a man that didn’t play games and liked him for all his faults instead of his merits.

He remembered a man that might love him too.

“I lied. I’m not out of this,” Harry whispered.

Tom’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I’m so in, it’s humiliating,” Harry muttered under his breath. He wrung his hands and looked back up at Tom, his eyes firm, set.

“Harry—” Tom started.

“Shut up, Tom,” Harry said, firmly. “Okay, here it is. Your choice, it’s simple, her or me.”

Harry would not be weak. He *refused* to be weak. He lifted his hand and took a step closer until they were only centimeters apart and he couldn't look away from Tom's strange brown eyes, so brown that they looked nearly burgundy.

"And I'm sure she's great—no, she's not. She's a heinous cunt. But Tom, I love you. In a really, really big pretend-to-like-your-taste-in-music, let-you-finish-my-treacle-tart, sing-Celestina-Warbeck-in-the-middle-of-the-street way that makes me hate you...love you. So pick me. Choose me. *Love* me," Harry said.

And he knew he sounded like he was begging, but he couldn't think of any other way to communicate what he wanted to say. He couldn't say what his hindbrain wanted to say, wanted him to scream—*i want to own you, i want to wreck you, i want die by your hand*—so he would settle for begging instead.

Harry took a step forward, his hands trembling as he brought them up to Tom's face. Tom was staring at him with those bright burgundy eyes, full of emotions that Harry couldn't read. It had always been so hard to read him.

"I want to kiss you," Tom said, softly.

Harry hummed and then he brought Tom's face down to his, their lips less than a centimeter apart. Harry's eyes were still wide open, coming out of focus the harder he tried to stare into those burgundy eyes. Up close, they seemed even redder than they normally did.

"Then, kiss me."

And Tom tilted his head just so, sealing their lips together. Harry melted into the kiss, sucking Tom's bottom lip between his as he devoured the man. Tom's hands fell on Harry's waist and he kissed him hard. Harry felt like he was drowning as his fingers brushed down Tom's jaw, down his neck, over his broad shoulders and he clung to him, his nails curling into him like claws. He jerked the man closer, only the pharmacy desk separating them, and anyone could pass by at any moment, but he couldn't find it in himself to give a damn.

Tom's kiss was desperate and aching, begging in a way that Harry didn't think he'd ever begged. Tom didn't have to beg. He was a proud man, and this kiss felt like someone on their knees, screaming.

And then, he knew. He knew what the man's choice would be.

Harry pulled back to catch his breath and he let out a broken sound.

"Are you finished with her?" Harry whispered.

Tom nodded once. "We're done."

Harry nodded, closing his eyes slowly. "I'm an idiot."

"Why?" Tom asked, quietly.

“For letting you do this to me. You’re...you make me so *angry,* you arse. But, you make me...Merlin, you make me feel alive,” Harry said, softly. He pulled back and took in a deep breath. It shuddered out, releasing all of his anger. He looked at him with a frown. “I won’t ever let you break me again.”

“I didn’t want to break you in the first place.”

“You’re not going to choose me,” Harry said with a tiny smile.

Tom’s eyes widened. “Why would you say that?” he asked, quietly.

"Oh, sweetheart, I know you," Harry whispered into the space between them. "I know you like my marrow. And I know I wouldn't choose you either if it were me in your place."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tom said, his voice hard.

Harry pressed his hand to Tom's cheek. "You won the grant, my mother is Lily Evans, and I live in the Black family home. I know who the check gets signed by. You won't choose me because she won't let you, and suddenly...I know how she feels."

“Harry,” Tom said, his voice full of warning.

“I’m going to be extraordinary, Tom Riddle,” Harry said like a promise. “And so will you. You built what you had on your own. With your own two hands. Because you had nothing. And you owe it to yourself to finish it. To finish the climb. And I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving you, but you’re going to have wait too. Because I’m going to be extraordinary.”

Tom took a step back and Harry saw it. He saw how he wrecked this man, and how this man pulled himself together in the blink of an eye.

“You are,” Tom agreed.

Harry leaned back, his breathing shaky. “And I know this...I know this logically. But, right now...I’m *so* angry with you. You can’t break me, but you *infuriate* me because you are a self-destructive bastard. So, I'm going to hate you for now. Let me hate you."

Tom nodded once. “Okay.”

He turned on his heel and didn’t look back.

Harry didn’t cry. He didn’t let himself feel his own sadness. Instead, he felt his rage.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry finally shut the pharmacy, locking it behind him with a fancy twist of his wand. He turned back around and smiled at Hermione. She grinned at him and offered her arm. He

looped his arm through hers and pressed tight to her side as they walked towards the stairs, ready to eat dinner before they finished up the second half of their shift.

“You look...lighter,” Hermione said.

Harry laughed, soft and happy. “I am lighter. I talked to Tom.”

Hermione’s head whipped around, her long braid thumping loudly against her back as she turned. Harry snorted at the bewilderment that changed her face into something loud and dramatic. It was so unlike her that he had to let out another laugh.

“What? Wait? Are you two…” she started.

“Merlin, no. We...well, he got the grant,” Harry began.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Shocker,” she drawled.

“I know. But, he said...I was the first person he wanted to tell and it just all came out. I told him to pick me. And then, he kissed me, and I knew that he wouldn’t,” Harry confessed and he shook his head when Hermione gave him a look full of sympathy. “No. I’m...not sad anymore. I’m just angry.”

“You have a right to be,” Hermione spat. “How dare he come down to you and...and...Merlin, we’re going to fuck him up. I was right about revenge. I’ll come up with *something*.”

"No. We won't be petty. We'll...rise above," Harry said, the picture of tranquility as they approached the lift. He let out a quiet huff and squirmed as they waited for the lift. He attempted to feel only calmness, though there was a pit in his stomach full of dread and rage.

“If that’s what you want,” Hermione said. She rocked back and forth, slowly turning to him. “Remember when I told you that I don’t think I’m going to specialize in Spell Damage.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I *do* remember you saying that and then you literally never brought it up again. What are you even saying? It’s Spell Damage or die!”

“Maybe for you. But...it doesn’t feel right,” Hermione confessed as they stepped into the lift. Harry reached forward to press the button as he waited, listening to her reasoning. “I’m good, Harry. Spectacular, even. And I know that. But...I’m not like you. I’m book smart. I’ve put in all the work, and that’s not Spell Damage. Not really. That’s...intuition. That’s what *you’ve* got, and I’m not going to be in a field where I’m second-best. I’m just not.”

“But, you wouldn’t—” Harry began.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Shut your mouth, Harry Potter. I hear you talk about being the best enough to know that you *mean* it when you say you’re going to be the best. You mean to be better than Ron, Neville, and me, and don’t pretend that you don’t.

Harry grinned, sheepish.

“Well, I guess. You’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right,” Hermione said, self-important as always. They stepped out of the lift, crossing through the lobby to reach the doors to the next corridor. “Now, I was thinking about other departments. Definitely not the Children Ward because...ugh, children. But, perhaps, Magical Diseases and—”

There was a loud crack. Hermione barely registered it. Hermione was still chattering in his ear, but he couldn’t hear her.

Harry’s heart stopped.

Bellatrix was kneeling on top of a gurney, straddling a pillow, a head of blonde curls in her lap. Her face was splattered with dark blood, dripping down her face as she waved her wand madly, screaming out orders. Her plague doctor mask was barely hanging around her neck, falling behind her and she threw down her wand again.

“Her heart keeps stopping! The stasis won’t hold if her body keeps *stopping!*” Bellatrix roared. “Dammit! *Astrapi*!”

The body jolted in her grasp, a hand flopping over the side of the gurney as the body jerked with the sudden burst of lightning. Hermione gasped as she stared at the gurney.

“Mediwizard Black!” Luna Lovegood shouted as she ran through the lobby, her wand held aloft. “We have to move her!”

There were three more cracks and Harry took a step back as three familiar faces were held back as a flurry of mediwizards rushed forward, ready to assist Bellatrix.

“Not until I have a mouth guard! Someone get her a mouth guard!” Bellatrix snarled. “Dammit...it keeps...stopping. *ASTRAPI!* Get her information in the system now. We go when I say ‘go’. Not a goddamn moment before. I want her body and her magic stable before anyone gets her hands in her or there’ll only be a fucking corpse for a coroner.”

The mediwizards did as she commanded.

“Incoming patient—”

“Name—”

“Admitted for creature-induced injuries to the face, neck, abdomen, and organs.”

“Lavender Brown.”

He could only hear the rush of his own blood in his ears.

And then he was running, pushing through the crowd.

“Let me through! Let me through!” he roared, shoving people aside. He didn’t care that he practically threw Luna on the ground. Instead, he pushed through until he was right in front of her.

There was so much *blood*.

He screamed.

Harry.

Harry.

Someone was calling his name and he couldn't stop screaming as he pressed his hands against the gouges in her chest, in her face, attempting to hold her together. Attempting to press her skin back together and he wept, salt mixing with iron, making it run down her body. He could see her *ribs*. He could see the organs that Bellatrix had attempted to push back into her body with her bare hands. He could see the muscles of her cheek, twisted around a massive black hole. He could see into her *mouth*, the place where her teeth met her gums.

They'd tried to rip her *throat* out.

"Who is she, Harry? Harry!"

Tom.

"Lavender, sweetheart...o-open your eyes," Harry begged. He collapsed onto his knees, his fingers slipping off and creating handprints on the floor. He looked up, his eyes cutting towards *James*. "What did you *do?* WHAT DID YOU DO?"

James stared at him, slack-mouthed. Tears streamed down his face as Sirius and Remus held him up, stopping him from collapsing inward.

Bellatrix hadn't spared them a glance. "Okay! Go!" she shouted, and then the gurney was speeding away, and Tom sank to his knees next to him, running his hands over Harry's face, pulling him away from his sister's *corpse*. Hermione was calling his name, but he couldn't hear.

He couldn't *hear*.

Harry's rage exploded and he pulled his wand, pointing it at the man.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" he screamed. "WHAT DID YOU *DO, JAMES?*"

James was trembling, stricken, looking at his daughter's body, speeding away, and then to his broken son, on the ground weeping. Sirius was whispering hurriedly in James' ear. James nodded and turned away, as Sirius dragged him away, after Luna Lovegood and Bellatrix and *Lavender.*

"Who is she, Harry?" Hermione whispered into his ears. Harry only let out a few blubbered words. "Tell me. Come on, Harry. Words. Use your words."

"M-my sister...my baby *sister*. A-and her name is Lavender Potter now," Harry sobbed. He trembled, attempting to bring himself together. He turned and looked at Remus who was watching him, patiently.

“Breathe, Harry,” Tom hissed.

Harry hadn’t looked away from Remus, his nostrils flared. “What. *Happened*?” he spat.

“James’ work caught up with him. Breathe,” Remus said, softly.

Harry closed his eyes. *Breathe.* Remus had always told him to breathe. Whenever he’d been a screaming match with his mother or James, Remus had been there. Whenever he had broken down, weeping, Remus had been there. *Breathe,* Remus had said.

“Breathe,” Tom whispered in his ear.

And Harry took a breath.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry walked briskly. He didn’t run. No one stood in his way, pressed against the walls as Hermione and Tom flanked him as he stormed up the stairs to the Children’s Ward. Remus followed after them, keeping himself as calm as possible. They were too close to the full moon for him to be anything *but* calm. He did it out of necessity, just as Harry did.

Bellatrix was collapsed outside a door, mopping the blood off her face with one a rag.

“*Tergeo,”* she whispered, siphoning it off her face with magic. She looked up when she heard them approaching. She lifted her chin, a stern look on her face. She had no eyes for Tom. “Potter.”

“Mediwizard Black,” Harry said, coolly.

“She’s stable. My stasis is strong. It won’t break unless I let her heart stop and I have no intention of doing so,” Bellatrix said. She took a step forward, eyes narrowing. “I know you were the trainee on my VIP case.”

“I was,” Harry allowed. He ignored the confused look on Hermione’s face.

“Then, I can tell you that this was directly a result of the work your father is currently doing. It happened near your family home. There are Aurors setting up wards, in case you intend to return. The only people present were your father, my cousin, Remus Lupin, and your sister. Your sister was the target. That’s all the information I currently have. Your father *was* my liaison with the Auror Office on this case. However, due to this development, I have acquired a new liaison: Auror Rufus Scrimgeour. Once I have further information, I *will* inform you and your family,” Bellatrix said.

“Thank you, Mediwizard Black,” Harry whispered.

Bellatrix lifted her chin. “I took an oath. No matter our personal issues, I wouldn’t break it.”

She stepped aside from the door, her plague doctor mask in hand as she walked briskly down the hallway, never looking back. Harry grabbed at the door frame, taking a deep breath as he tried to gather himself. He had to prepare himself.

“That was your sister?” Hermione finally asked.

“She’s...she’s adopted,” Harry hissed, struggling to breathe. “My mother didn’t want to be pregnant again after me. It would...hinder her from working. So, they adopted her when I was six. She was five. Half-blood. Dead parents. *Fuck.”*

“Harry…” Tom began.

Harry spun around, his eyes burning with tears and rage. “Tom, leave me alone.”

Tom’s eyes widened and then he glowered at Harry. “I was just—” he snarled.

“I don’t give a fuck. Leave. Me. Alone,” Harry spat before he spun back around, throwing the door open, letting it bang against the wall.

He stomped in, ignoring the wane shock on James’ face, and the terrible grief on Sirius’. His eyes shot over to Luna. She had three matrons at her side as they settled Lavender in the bed. She looked so tiny compared to the massive bed. She’d always been slight and short with long blonde curls. It was copper-colored now, covered in her own drying blood. The wounds were a livid red against her paper skin.

“Harry—” Sirius began.

Harry ignored him. “Luna, what’s going on? I want everything. Diagnosis, prognosis, treatment.”

Luna snapped to attention, immediately, looking at him with narrowed grey eyes.

“Absolutely,” she said, firmly. “Lavender Brown, 16 years old. Victim of creature-induced injuries. I have been told on a need to know basis that the wounds were induced by a werewolf. They were purposefully made so that she wouldn’t transform. Meant to maim, and eventually kill.”

Harry took in a sharp breath through his nose to stop himself from screaming. He knew that it would be werewolves. Moody had almost died from a werewolf attack. Then, there was the kid that had been mauled in Hogsmeade. The kid had died. He took another breath.

“Prognosis? Treatment?” he asked, again.

Luna shook her head. “I’m Magical Diseases. I can’t tell you that.”

Harry nodded once. “Okay. Thank you,” he whispered. He turned to James, then, his rage emerging once more. “What the fuck have you done?”

“He was doing his *job*,” Sirius snapped.

“His job almost got Lavender killed so excuse the fuck out of me if I’m angry,” Harry spat. “I know you two, you know. I *know* you. You got cocky. You got too close. And whoever the fuck did this knew who you were and you knew who he was, and he targeted her because she’s defenseless. So *fuck* you.”

“It was an accident,” Remus said, calmly. He joined Sirius’ side, lacing their fingers together and leaning into his side.

“Look at her,” Harry spat. He pointed to her body even though he couldn’t look. He couldn’t or he’d *shatter*. “Look. At. Her. She’s a living *corpse.* They tore her *apart.*”

“I know! You don’t think I see that!” James shouted back. “I know that. I was the one who found her, you know! I found her broken and bleeding. They left her on our doorstep so that I’d *know.* So, that I’d know it was them!”

“The screaming isn’t good for her. It’ll cause distress and crack the stasis charm,” Hermione warned.

Neither Potter man heeded her words.

“If she dies, I will *never* forgive you!” Harry shouted. “She was the only one...she was the only *one* who gave a damn about this family! Who gave a damn!”

“You think I don’t care? You think that I don’t?” James snarled, pulling his wand on his own son.

Harry blinked and then looked down. He hadn’t realized that he had pulled his wand too.

“I *know* you don’t! You don’t give a shit about anything except *yourself*!”

“Ha! You’re the one who won’t show up for *Christmas*,” James sneered.

“Because you’re a shit father! And I’ve got a shit mother!”

“Enough,” Sirius barked. “We are family! We are one!”

Harry let out a terrible laugh, turning on Sirius. “This isn’t a family! This is a joke! We’re one big joke! Look at us...look at *us*. We’re *damned*,” Harry hissed.

He took another step forward until a hand wrapped around his wrist, yanking him around. He gasped when he stared down at Hermione. She looked up at him, stern-faced and she grabbed him by the cheeks pulling his forehead down to hers.

“We’re a family, Harry Potter,” Hermione hissed to him. “You and me and Ron and Neville and...and...Lavender, there. In the bed. *We* are your family. And we are here. You are not alone. You are *never* alone. Do you *hear* me?”

Harry let out one dry sob and fell against her. His knees buckled but Hermione didn’t let him fall.

“Who is she?” Harry heard Sirius whisper.

The three began speaking amongst themselves as Hermione stared at him.

“Do you hear me?” she snapped.

“Yes...I hear you,” he whispered.

“Good. Now...that’s *enough*. It’s enough, Harry,” Hermione murmured, stern but soft.

Harry nodded, taking a deep breath and leaned up, pressing his lips to her forehead before he pulled away, turning back to Luna.

“Luna!” Harry barked. Remus, James, and Sirius all fell silent, turning towards Harry. He was still clinging to the side of Lavender’s bed. Luna looked at him with solemn eyes. “You better...you better fix her. You better not let her die.”

“I am going to put my very best on this,” Luna said, sounding so very serious as she looked at Harry. She took a step forward, pressing a hand to his cheek. “Harry, we protect our own here.”

“Can’t let Lily Evans’ daughter die?” Harry sniffled.

Luna’s eyes narrowed. “No. We can’t let *your* sister die. *You’re* our own.”

DIAGNOSIS

Draco Malfoy scurried after his boss, dragging her bag behind him. He glanced over at Astoria, but she didn’t seem half as frazzled as him. She held their teacher’s bag over one shoulder, looking through her urgent files, making notes that she would send back to France the moment that they settled. He looked at their boss who hadn’t even stopped to wait for them, single-mindedly storming through the lobby of St. Mungo’s Hospital.

He turned his gaze back to his boss’ back. The matrons and Healers were all watching her, unable to contain their excitement and awe. That had been Draco once. Smugly, he straightened his waistcoat as he followed after her.

“*Ça va?*” he muttered in Astoria’s ear. *How are you?*

She barely looked up. “*Pas mal. J’ai beaucoup à faire*,” she hissed. *Not bad. I have a lot to do.* She looked up at the back of their boss, but she had continued her brisk path of destruction. “*Elle a peur.*” *She is scared.*

Draco didn’t see their boss as scared. Just her presence seemed to make everyone press against the walls, terrified of being in her path as she stormed up to the Information Desk.

The two matrons behind it had their backs to her, whispering to one another in English. Draco's lips curled into a sneer. He hated English. It was so...*confusing.*

"The daughter—"

"In the—the trainee, Potter—"

Their boss glanced over her shoulder. "*Dépêchez-vous,*" she spat.

The two matrons jumped, spinning around. The older matron paled dramatically as she looked up at the tall, statuesque woman. She reached back, blindly, smacking at the younger matron and she immediately scurried to gather together papers.

"M-ma'am. You're back early. W-we would've p-prepared if we knew," the matron stammered.

Slowly, the woman pressed her red hair behind her ear. She lifted her chin, her lip curling in rage.

"Don't care. Now tell me...*where's* my daughter?"

DIAGNOSIS

He was nearly alone with her. Hermione had refused to leave his side even as James and Sirius had stepped out to debrief with Bellatrix and the Auror Office. Remus had gone to the cafeteria to get them dinner. But, Harry wasn't hungry anymore. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving her side. She looked so small.

You have to promise to take care of her, his mother had said when they brought her home. *She's not the much younger, but she's your little sister.*

And Harry...oh, Harry had taken that oath seriously. He always had, even when it had been so hard. He had tried his best, and sometimes, his best hadn't been good enough. He hadn't written her enough. He hadn't even tried to visit, and now she was dying. And he knew that wasn't what Luna had said, but he could feel it in her bones. She was *dying*. Someone had buried their hands inside her and attempted to tear her apart as a warning. Someone had made the decision to destroy her in the name of a vendetta.

Lavender. His sweet little sister. His little sister who was the biggest gossip in the world, who was brash and bright, and a damn *Gryffindor*, just like their parents. Damn, he could imagine it now. When they had found her, she hadn't flinched probably. She wouldn't have. Even if she was terrified of beetles and hated swimming because she thought she'd drown even though Sirius had taught them both how to swim, she had probably looked them in the eye and hissed, *Do your worst.*

It was in her nature. She would've bared her teeth and kept her eyes open through the entire thing. She'd probably only screamed towards the end because she was so damn *brave.* Harry had never had the slightest bit of courage that she had possessed.

“I don’t remember your sister,” Hermione said, quietly.

“Her name is Lavender Brown-Potter. They only use your first surname. Smart of her. No one wants to be compared to the master Healer or the Auror hero,” Harry said, unable to keep the spite out of his voice when he thought about his father. “What a Goddamn hero. Couldn’t even save his own daughter.”

“Harry...he’s hurting too. That’s his *daughter*. He’s destroying himself,” Hermione said, patiently. “And I know you can’t see it through your pain but...get some perspective. Not now because you’re hurting, but...come on.”

Harry ignored her wise words, instead leaning forward and sliding into the enormous bed next to Lavender, careful not to jostle her body too much. Hermione looked on the edge of telling him off but seemed to think better of it, leaning back in her chair.

“Oh...oh, Lav,” Harry whispered, stroking his fingers through her long blonde curls, kissing her hairline as he curled around her. He was mindful of the terrible wounds that curled down her broken cheek, her ravaged neck, across her chest, covered now by a hospital robe.

He closed his eyes, thinking back to when they were children. Lavender used to have terrible nightmares when she had first come home. Their mother used to sing. He thought she used to sing. He could almost hear her singing—a beautifully happy song that she would sing like a funeral march. But, he couldn’t be sure. Had she ever sang them to sleep?

“*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high*

There’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue.

And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.”

His voice cracked, sweet and terrible as he stroked his fingers through her hair, wishing that he had a hairbrush. Sometimes, when they were younger, he'd meet her in the Room of Requirement after curfew. He'd use the Invisibility Cloak, and she'd use the Marauder's Map. They would sit in the Room of Requirement and he'd brush her hair while she whispered gossip to him that he could use to his advantage whenever someone was a dick. They were a team that way. Once they were done gossiping, they'd laugh.

“*Someday I’ll wish upon a star*

And wake up where the clouds are far behind me.

Where troubles melt like lemon drops

Away above the chimney tops.

That's where you'll find me."

In Harry's darkest moment, when he reached rock bottom, and they were a little older—her fifteen and a prefect, him seventeen and a fucking delinquent—she would drag him out of a Gryffindor boy's bed and take him to the Room of Requirement. She would throw him into a shower to wash the alcohol and cum out of his hair and let him sob into her robes.

"*Somewhere over the rainbow bluebirds fly*

Birds fly over the rainbow.

Why, tell me, why can't I?"

And when some boy or girl broke her heart—because Lavender loved nothing more than a broken heart—he would sing this song to her while they sat behind their childhood home, at the edge of the forest. He would sit on the tree stump and she would sit in the grass and he would sing because though he didn't have the voice of angels, at least he didn't have a voice like a mermaid on land like she did. He would sing and sing until she smiled again.

"*If happy—*" he began, and then a voice.

A voice familiar and horrifying and wonderful and terrible echoed softly through the room. And when Harry opened his eyes again, he could remember. She *had* sung to them. She had sung them to sleep every night until she had decided that they didn't need her when they had needed her *most.*

"*If happy little bluebirds fly*

Beyond the rainbow.

Why, oh, why can't I?"

Harry and Hermione looked up at the doorway. Hermione gasped, taking a step back. She looked different from what Hermione had thought she would. She was much taller and leaner. Her hair was chopped, falling just past her chin and she wore it in a little bun at the nape of her neck, some tendrils framing her face. Her hair was darker than Hermione had imagined, the color of dried blood.

"Hi, Mum."

Lily Evans took a step closer, her eyes never shifting from her children. "Hello, Harry."

Chapter End Notes

First: My finger slipped.

Second: I listened to a lot of sad ass Christmas music for this chapter. LOTS and LOTS of sad Christmas music. Except, for the ending where I found a sweet ass but sad lullaby. If you wanted to know, Harry is singing the song in minor key, because I felt that that was appropriately depressing. Minor key makes any song sad.

Third: A wild Lily appears.

And, finally: As I write this note, I have 1006 kudos. I never thought that I would have that many readers. Never in my life did I think that many people would care about a stupid little medical dramedy that I wrote because my main fic, Fairest, was getting too dark. And yet, here you all are. Thank you so, so much for caring about my stupid little fic that I wrote due to my unhealthy love for Grey's Anatomy, ER, and everything like it. I hope you continue reading on.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello, Harry.”

She took a step into the room, her eyes never drifting from his face. It felt like she was staring past his skin, past the muscle, straight into his soul. She had always had that type of the stare, the type of stare that could rip you apart and stare right into your core. The type of stare that could read your every move and pick all your faults out, one by one. Except, maybe she could only do that to him.

"Thank you for blessing us with your presence, Mom," Harry drawled, aggressive as ever when confronted with a predator. He shrugged Hermione's hand off his shoulder, already gearing up for a fight.

“My daughter was *mauled.* You didn’t think I’d come back as soon as possible?” Lily demanded, striding forward, her gaze caught on Lavender’s beautiful face. The tears in her skin hadn’t quite spared her but she was still beautiful to Harry.

“See I couldn’t be sure exactly what kind of injury would be enough for you to, you know, parent. I don’t remember broken arms ranking very high,” Harry retorted nastily.

Lily’s eyes narrowed and she stepped forward. “You were fourteen and the matron healed you immediately. No one told you to sneak out and fly in the Quidditch Pitch after curfew,” Lily snarled and she turned away from Harry, her eyes stuck on her daughter. Her gaze softened and Hermione jumped up from her seat, pressing into the corner of the room.

Lily nodded to her and settled into the vacated seat, grabbing Lavender's hand tight in her own.

“Dad and Sirius are debriefing with the Auror Office and the Mediwizard that saved her,” Harry said, quietly, putting aside his anger.

Lily looked up, her head tilted just so. “Who was it?”

“Bellatrix Black.”

“She’s good,” Lily allowed. “Very good.”

“She did good work,” Harry admitted softly. He put his head back down on the pillow next to Lavender’s face.

Lily sighed, staring at him. "You blame your father because his work is dangerous. You blame me for not being there."

“I do,” Harry whispered.

“That’s okay. That’s okay for now,” Lily said, quietly. She looked like she might reach for him, but seemed to think better of it, stiffening in her chair and squeezing Lavender’s hand. Then, she leaned forward as if to say something when the door flew open.

James flew into the room, going straight to Lily’s side. She tilted her chin up and pressed her lips to his in a quick greeting kiss.

“Hello, my love,” James whispered. His voice sounded hoarse and terribly sad.

“Hello, my love,” Lily whispered back as they always did when they reunited after a long separation. She looked up again as the door creaked open once more.

“Hello Potter, Auror Potter, Healer Evans,” Vance said as she briskly entered the room. All of her usual giddiness was missing. Harry wasn’t surprised. He supposed that all the joy was sucked out of you once you realized that your patient was *the* Lily Evans’ child. “I’ll be the primary Healer on Lavender’s case.”

“Emmeline?” Lily asked with a frown.

Vance held up her hand. “Healer Evans, I can assure you that I am *the* best in my field. I am currently Head of Creature-Induced Injuries and I will do everything in my power to make sure your child lives, and scarring is as minimal as possible."

“You can really do that?” James asked, almost afraid to hope.

Vance nodded. “Yes. I can. Her prognosis is good. If she makes it through the night, building her magical core and stamina, she’ll survive a procedure.”

Harry trembled. He jumped up from the bed, eyes wide. “Healer Vance, let me be on your service. Please,” he begged.

“You know the rules, Potter. No family members,” Vance said, warningly.

“Please, Healer Vance. She’s my...she’s my *sister*,” Harry said, his voice cracking.

Vance had a stern but kind look in her eyes. “I know that. Which is why you can’t be on this case. You’re not at your best, and we both know this isn’t your field. However, you may choose who assists me,” Vance allowed.

“Hermione,” Harry blurted out immediately. Hermione jerked to attention in the corner of the room. Harry looked over at her, wild-eyed. “She’s the best. You know it. I know it. She’s no-nonsense. She takes no prisoners. And she’ll be real with me.”

“Fine. Granger, you’re on my service,” Vance said. Hermione nodded once. Vance strode forward, tutting softly to herself as she finally surveyed the damage.

“She won’t survive this,” Lily said, her voice soft. “So much soft tissue damage. Organ punctures. And if she does...the amount of therapy...physical and mental...Merlin, my girl.”

“Don’t say shit like that, Mum!” Harry snarled, blinded by his tears.

“Healer Evans, I am quite sure that your daughter will make it. If we have anything to say about it,” Vance said, firmly. “As long as the stasis charm holds, she’ll be fine. However, I may need to perform an internal procedure. There’s so much damage, that I wouldn’t know where to start without opening her up. Do I have your permission, Healer Evans?”

“An internal procedure? But, that’s...Emmeline…” Lily whispered. “And with just a trainee?”

“Harry’s done them. I’ve watched. He can tell me everything to ensure your daughter’s safety. I know the organs inside and out. Trust Healer Vance. She can do this,” Hermione said, stepping forward immediately.

Lily's eyes widened as she looked at Harry and Hermione. Harry was staring at Lavender's face, a blank look in his eyes now.

“A last resort. Do you hear me, Emmeline? Last. Resort,” Lily said, coldly.

“Of course,” Vance said with a funny little nod of her head. She turned on her heel, beckoning sharply to Hermione. “Come now, Granger. There’s work to be done.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione stood in the office, pressed against the wall as Emmeline waved her wand, magically wiping all of the whiteboards in the room clean. The woman didn’t look nearly as confident as she had seemed only moments earlier. She was talking to herself, shaking out her hands and she took a deep breath before she stopped pacing right in the middle of her office.

“You wouldn’t have been my first choice,” Emmeline muttered under her breath.

Hermione nodded once. “I understand that. You don’t like me,” Hermione said.

Emmeline looked up sharply, her eyes wide. A slight flush appeared.

“It’s not...I mean…”

“I’m not bothered by it. Not many people like me. I’m pushy, loud, and an insufferable know-it-all, and I have the audacity of being black while being all of those things,” Hermione said, laughing lightly.

Emmeline squeaked. “Wait, what? No, it has nothing to do with your *skin*,” Emmeline snarled.

Hermione hummed, leaning back against the wall, amused. Her lips curled into a close-mouthed smile. “Okay. Good. But, you didn’t deny any of the other things.”

“You’re very...sure of yourself. For a trainee,” Emmeline said, delicately.

“You don’t like me, but you’ve shown me professional courtesy, so I don’t mind,” Hermione said with a shrug. “When I was younger, I wanted everyone to like me. That’s not the real world. I don’t mind.”

"Okay. I just...you wouldn't be my first choice. Some people don't mesh. I don't think we do, but you were requested and so I'll do what I must. No matter my...personal reservations, you are good, Granger," Emmeline said.

Hermione nodded once. “Thank you.”

“My reputation is on the line here. I’m sure you understand that,” Emmeline said.

Hermione nodded again. She understood that perfectly well. This was a case that would make or break Emmeline Vance’s career. If Lavender Brown-Potter died on Emmeline’s watch, in her magical theatre, her future would be ruined. This was Lily Evans’ daughter. This was the daughter of, arguably, the greatest Healer alive. If she died…

"I am going to assist you in any way you need. Even if that means running to get you a tea or coffee," Hermione promised. Emmeline looked at her with wide eyes. "We are a team. You're point and I'm the support. I am here to *learn* from *you*. Because you are the Healer on this case.”

Emmeline took a deep breath and nodded once, gathering herself. When she looked at Hermione again, there was a glint of steel in her eyes and she reached for a dry-erase marker. She tossed it to Hermione. Hermione fumbled for a moment, tossing it up again, once, then twice before she grabbed a firm hold on it.

“Okay. Good. I trust that. Now, let’s get started,” Emmeline began and she walked up to the closest board, jotting out notes. “We’ve got a girl, 16, with claw wounds that almost severed her aorta and vocal cords. She’s half-dead and she might scar. She’s nearly in pieces. It’s *our* job to make her whole.”

DIAGNOSIS

Lily watched him carefully from across the cafeteria table. Harry wasn’t exactly paying attention to her. He was looking down at a stack of files, his quill moving back and forth at a pace that made even Lily dizzy.

“What are you doing?” James asked quietly.

“I’m still, technically, at work,” Harry murmured.

“What service are you on?” Lily asked.

Harry paused, slowly looking up at her with bright eyes. “I’m not on a service. But, I’m going to be a Spell Damage specialist.”

Lily hummed, bewildered and impressed. “The big leagues.”

"I'm just big enough," Harry retorted snidely. Then, he seemed to catch himself and he let out a long sigh, breathing away the antagonization. He looked up, and he looked so tired. Lily recognized that exhaustion. Sometimes, she even missed it—the thrill of learning, the urge to be the best all the time. There was no motivation once you reached the top. "I was on pharmacy duty all day, so I was in the middle of studying. I closed the pharmacy and was going to dinner with a housemate, and then...well, Lavender was here."

“Your housemate. The girl? Hermione Granger, was it?” Lily asked.

James leaned forward. “The trainee you asked for?”

"Yeah. She's great," Harry said. His tone brooked no argument. James leaned back as if that satisfied him. He reluctantly pushed the limp greens around his plate with his fork. Harry went to look back down at his work, but Lily was still watching him. "What is it?"

“You did an internal procedure,” Lily said. She sounded bewildered.

“Yeah. What of it?” Harry sneered.

Lily leaned forward. “When? You’ve only been a trainee for five months.”

“My first day. There was a patient who was hit with a Heart-Fragmenting Curse and then, the Hela-Wasting Curse. The hearts weren’t binding properly because one of them had rotted in his chest. It was…” Harry’s voice softened as he thought back to that day. His first proper day at St. Mungo’s, and even that was marred—no, not marred—by a memory of Tom.

“Brilliant,” Lily said, staring at him as if he were a difficult Arithmancy problem. “Did you discover that on your own?”

“No. I had help. Hermione’s. That’s why I know she can do this,” Harry said.

“You talk about her a lot. She...more than a friend?” James asked.

Harry snorted. “Nope. Still strictly dick-ly.”

James groaned. “Merlin, Harry.”

Harry smirked, delightful in his pettiness. He tried to ignore Lily’s gaze, but he was forever trapped in it, put under a Magnifying Charm.

“Who was Head Healer on it?” Lily asked.

“Tom...Riddle,” Harry said, tacking on his last name.

Lily didn’t need to know his fucking sex life like everyone else in the damn hospital.

“He is arrogant.”

“He’s a dick,” James added.

Two things that Harry wouldn’t contest.

"He's a good teacher. He let me open up the patient," Harry said, his eyes bright and he leaned forward, a small smile playing on his lips. Lily's eyes narrowed on the move as if she could find the source of his distraction.

Before she could ask, she heard someone call, “Healer Evans.”

Harry looked up as a tall, thin pale man approached. He looked about Harry’s age, with a pointy chin, an equally pointy nose and hair so pale it looked nearly white. He had Luna’s coloring, but he was so much colder. Harry’s nose wrinkled.

“Ah, Draco. Come,” Lily called. The young man approached, standing at her side. “James, Harry, this is one of my students—Draco Malfoy.”

“Malfoy. Is Lucius Malfoy your father?” James asked.

Draco’s nose wrinkling. “Ah, *oui*. Yes, I mean. *Ma mère et*…”

“English, Draco,” Lily said, gently.

“I mean, my mother and father are separated. I do not see him quite so often now that I am grown,” Draco said.

James snorted. “Good on your mum. Narcissa, isn’t it?” James said, lifting his plastic cup up to him in a toast. Draco’s lips twitched and he nodded in agreement.

Harry frowned, wondering why that name was so *damn* familiar.

“I’m Harry Potter,” Harry said, attempting some semblance of politeness.

Draco turned towards him and raised a single pale eyebrow, all the displeasure in the world in that one facial twitch.

“Indeed,” Draco drawled.

Harry frowned. “Um, excuse me?”

“I was...expecting more from the great Lily Evans’ son.”

Harry reared back, surprised by the blatant rudeness. He glanced at James and Lily, wide-eyed, wondering if they had heard what he had. James shrugged, eyes wide, and Lily was watching, waiting for his reaction. As if it were some kind of weird test.

“How so?” Harry asked, his voice flat.

“You are short and do not seem very impressive,” Draco drawled. “What is your specialty?”

“Spell Damage,” Harry said through clenched teeth.

Draco hummed. “I would have...how you say..pegged you for an...Accidenter?” he said, as if unsure of his word choice.

Harry slammed his hands on the table, eyes narrowed. “Repeat what you said.”

“Can you not, ah, hear?” Draco challenged.

“Oh, no, I can. I just want to make sure that I heard you right so I don’t feel bad about punching you in your smug face, you pointy-faced *git*,” Harry hissed.

Draco frowned, his head tilted. “What is…‘git’?”

“It means that you’re unpleasant. *Bonjour, mon neveu*.”

Harry felt his heart stop. Narcissa. Narcissa Malfoy nee *Black* on the family tree. And that silvery line connected to…

“Oh fuck,” Harry breathed as he looked up at Bellatrix. She was already embracing Draco as he babbled to her in French, his thin lips curled into a smug little smirk. Harry sneered. “Of fucking course.”

“Harry, she saved your sister,” James chided.

“Oh and I fucking appreciate it. But, she’s a bitch. No *offense*, Mediwizard,” Harry spat.

Bellatrix smirked. "None taken, *sweetheart*.”

“What did I *say* about calling me that?” Harry snarled, his lips curled back into a sneer.

Bellatrix laughed, darkly, her breasts shaking with the force of her laugh.

“Harry, Harry, *Harry*, do you really want to get into this here? And now?”

Harry stood up, sharply, shaking his head. “I’ve got work to do.”

“As do we,” Lily said. She stood and made a sharp movement to Draco, and he stepped away from Bellatrix, the picture of professionalism again. “Draco, I must wrap up loose ends in France.”

“*Oui*, *Guérisseur*,” Draco agreed.

“Alas, I do not come on purely familial motives. Auror Potter, there’s been an update on the VIP patient. Come, let us talk,” Bellatrix said. She paused, regarding Harry with a look. “Discretion, Potter.”

“I *know*,” Harry spat and he stormed away, shaking his head.

Somehow, he felt like he had failed Lily’s little test.

DIAGNOSIS

He cleared his throat, running his hands through greasy hair before he knocked on the door. It had been in his daily habits, for the first month or so, to do this exact routine, ready to vent about his day, before he remembered that she wasn't there. Before he remembered that she had gone off to France to do whatever the hell it was instead of being in England, in St. Mungo's *(with him)* where she belonged.

Severus didn't have to remember this time. Now, he knew that she was behind the door, in her office as she always was. So, he knocked and then opened the door without waiting for her invitation.

She was just as beautiful as ever. Her hair was shorter. The last time he had seen her, it had gone past her shoulders in delicate waves. The crow's feet at the corner of her eyes and the lines around her mouth had only been there when she was laughing. Now, she grimaced and for the first time, Severus felt his age and hers.

She hadn't even noticed him enter.

"Lily," he said, his voice gentle.

She still hadn't noticed. She was standing by the glass wall that looked out towards the lobby, speaking in terribly fast French to two young people. A young woman had her head bent forward as she went through what looked like case files, and a young blonde man was scrawling how Lily's dictations.

"Lily," Severus repeated.

Lily jerked to a stop and spun to face him. Her eyes wide.

"Oh, Severus. Hello," she said. Her lips curled into a small smile. "How are you, my friend?"

"I am well. I'd be better if you had visited under less pressing circumstances," Severus said. Lily came to him, grabbing his hands in her own and she looked at him and sighed, nodding in agreement.

"I'd be better too. These are my students. Draco is writing instructions back to France for me," Lily said with a tiny smile.

"Are you not returning?" Severus asked.

"How can I? My daughter is injured. Even if she...survives...she'll need extensive PT. I need to be here for it," Lily said.

Severus' eyes widened. "Will you come back to St. Mungo's?

Lily frowned, pained.

“No. I don’t expect so. Not yet, anyway.”

Severus jerked his hands away from her, shaking his head in disbelief. She looked at him, her lips pursed as if willing him not to explode. It hadn't worked when they were children and it certainly wouldn't not. Severus crossed his arms, defensive.

“Why not?”

“I have to focus on Lavender’s PT.”

“That’s not why. Is it because of your *son*?” Severus couldn’t help but spit out the word. He couldn’t help the disdain and irritation that itched at his skin as he thought about that bitter little boy that reminded him far too much of James fucking Potter.

“In part,” Lily allowed. “This is his workplace.”

“He’s an arrogant brat, Lily, just like his father. If you heard all of the things that he’s been up to—” Severus began, rage burning through him and Lily shook her head, rolling her eyes as she watched Severus with those knowing eyes. He hated those eyes as much as he loved them. She could always see right through him.

“I don’t care. Harry works here. He doesn’t need his mother hanging around. He’ll be good. Great, even, if he can get his head on straight. He did an internal *procedure*...Merlin, on his first day," Lily said, whispering to herself. She blinked, suddenly looking even more tired than before and she took a step forward. Severus flinched backward. "Now, Severus, I'm very tired, and I have a lot of work to do."

He knew a dismissal when he heard it. Outraged, he started, “But, Lily, I—”

“Severus, I don’t have time right now,” she said, her expression firm as she backed him out of the door. She slowly shut it in his face and the paused. The crack in the door only revealed a sliver of her face and one bright green eye. “I’ll speak to you later. I promise.”

DIAGNOSIS

“You.”

“*You*,” Tom mocked, sneering back at him. Harry sniffed, stomping past him and sliding the old case files back into their proper places on the library shelves. He turned back around to walk past the older man, but Tom’s hand flew up, blocking the aisle off. “You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve, Harry.”

“Fuck off, Tom,” Harry retorted.

Tom shook his head. “Your sister is dying downstairs and that’s all you have to say to me?”

“That’s *exactly* all I have to say to you. I don’t have...*time* for this bullshit when my sister is downstairs *dying*. So, what more is there? Do you need it in writing?” Harry demanded.

“You’re so full of shit,” Tom barked. Harry’s eyes widened at the man’s words, and he crossed his arms over his chest, defensive to the very end. “You complain about everything and you’re bitter because you *like* to be bitter. You like to wallow in your own fucking angst.”

“Wow. This coming from the man that puts his work before the love of his fucking life because you think you can only have one thing?” Harry demanded.

Tom scoffed, shaking his head.

“You’re making a lot of assumptions.”

“Oh, don’t give me that, Tom,” Harry drawled. “I’m...I’m so tired of being nice.”

“You’ve *never* been nice,” Tom said, his voice low. He took a step closer, his eyes raking over Harry’s body. And Harry knew that what he looked like—ill, exhausted, and he probably smelled antiseptic, both clean and dirty. Still, Tom looked at him as if he were beautiful.

He shivered.

“You followed me up here. I...I *accepted* your fucking choice. You chose your work. I asked *one* thing of you. Let me hate you,” Harry snarled.

Tom rolled his eyes. “You can hate me all you want, but you’re a Spell Damage trainee. We’re going to need to work together.”

“Not anytime soon. Not until my sister is...on the mend,” Harry said. He closed his eyes.

His sister on the mend. What a joke.

And then there was hand on his cheek. He looked up at Tom with wide eyes. Tom's eyes were serious as he rubbed his thumb over Harry's cheek in slow circular motions.

“Bellatrix is a good mediwizard. Her work isn’t shoddy and she did her very best on your sister in the field. Emmeline Vance is very good at what she does, sweetheart. She’s going to live,” Tom said, firmly. He took Harry’s face in his hands, bringing their foreheads together.

“I don’t know what I’d do if she died,” Harry said, quietly.

“You’d move on.” Harry jerked back, wounded, but Tom didn’t let him get far. “You’re a survivor. You would grieve and scream and shout and then you’d *move on.* But, it’s not going to come to that. She’s going to live. And if she doesn’t, you’ll move on.”

Tom leaned up, pressing a quick kiss to Harry’s forehead. Harry looked away, and he did something he hadn’t done in a long time—blush.

“Stop it,” Harry whispered.

Tom rolled his eyes and nodded, releasing him. “I know. I know. You may go back to hating me now.”

Harry peeled away and walked down the aisle, leaving Tom behind him. Harry jerked to a stop as he saw a slight blonde woman standing by the end of the aisle, staring at him with a curious look on her face. Harry’s eyes narrowed.

"Were you listening in on my conversation?" Harry demanded.

“*Qu'est-ce que ç'est?*” she babbled in a bubble gum sweet voice. “*Je ne sais pas parler englais.*”

Harry cringed. “Sorry. Nevermind. Do you need to go to the lobby?”

“Lo-bby?” she said, sounding out the word and shaking her head.

Harry nodded and walked away, his head bowed forward. He missed the way the bubblegum sweet girl's expression melted away, revealing impassivity. The young blonde woman straightened and strode out, her short heels clicking quietly as she pulled her cloak tighter around herself. She walked in the opposite direction of her boss' son, taking the back stairwell back to her office.

Astoria Greengrass didn’t have to go far to get to Lily’s office. She didn’t knock, swinging the door open and both Lily and Draco looked up, surprised by her appearance.

“*Astoria, où—*” Draco began.

“English, Draco. We are in England now,” Astoria said, her accent thick and throaty. She turned to Lily, her eyes narrowed. “Healer Evans, I was upstairs in the library.”

“What is it?” Lily asked, immediately, turning away from the loose ends she was trying to tie up. Draco finished up his last letter, passing it to her. She didn’t even look down as she signed it and folded it neatly. She passed it back to Draco to seal.

“I saw something.”

DIAGNOSIS

"Come in," Emmeline called, frazzled. She pulled out her pocket watch and winced. It was nearly two in the morning on Christmas Day, and they hadn't made any ground. They kept going in circles, back to the wounds.

Hermione looked back at the board, at the light sketch of a female body. It was a simple outline in black. Red marked all of the wounds, green streaks circled superficial, and blue circled the critical points. It was a mess. Everything about it was a mess. She looked up even as her head fell forward, exhaustion weighing heavily over her.

The door creaked open and Hermione smiled gently when a head of red hair peeked through the crack.

“Hey, Ron,” Hermione said with a wave.

Emmeline stumbled over a stack of papers—old case files that they had looked through for precedent. There was none.

“Ron!” Emmeline squeaked. “What brings you here?”

“Hey, Em. We come bearing gifts,” Ron said. Hermione nearly collapsed in happiness as he pushed the door open and Neville paraded in with two enormous cups of coffee in his hand. A little magical kettle was hanging from Ron’s hands, a basket of tea bags in his other hand.

“You’re a lifesaver, Ron,” Emmeline said, gratefully taking the mug from Neville. “And you too, Longbottom.”

“You’re welcome,” Neville said with a little smile. He watched as Emmeline greedily gulped down her black coffee, uncaring how scalding it was. She didn’t complain once, only looking more rejuvenated the more she bathed her mouth in the bitter liquid.

Hermione hummed as she looked up at Ron. Ron held his hand out and passed her mug to her. She held it between her hands, shivering. Ron knelt down so that they were eye-level and he reached forward, bumping her chin up so that they were looking one another in the eye.

“Are you coming home, hag?” Ron asked, gently.

“I can’t. This is...this is his *sister* and he asked for *me*,” Hermione whispered. Her voice cracked as she finally let herself break down. “I can’t fail him. Not in this.”

“You won’t. You’re brilliant, Granger. You got this,” Ron said, reassuring.

Hermione gave a weak smile and nodded, taking a sip of the coffee. She paused, tilting her head. “Two spoonfuls of sugar, and a splash of half-and-half.”

"Yeah, that fake shit you like. I live with you. Of course, I know how you take your coffee," Ron scoffed. He was smiling though and Hermione's smile widened just a little bit. She laughed softly to herself, nodding. Ron looked up at Emmeline. She was watching, a cracked smile on her face. "How you doing, Em?"

"I'm...we're working hard. We're exhausted. We're going to crash," Emmeline said in stilted sentences. She looked deep in thought and she turned her gaze back to the board, shaking herself as she set her empty mug down.

"Sleep a REM cycle, get back up. You won't be able to think straight until you sleep," Neville said earnestly. Emmeline looked at him as if she had forgotten that he was there. "You just had a cup of coffee, but in a few hours. Around six, try to sleep until nine or so."

"Good idea," Emmeline whispered. She stood and crossed to the board, pointing out a wound. "Okay, so the carotid artery is sliced, but she's not dead. That was done...this was all

intentional. That's easily done, but she scars. If she scars...the mental damage is going to be something awful. She'll be in constant pain too."

“So, we figure out how to keep it from scarring,” Hermione said, firmly. She faltered. “That’s impossible, though. Werewolves are creatures of Dark magic. Dark magic scars.”

“Magic scars. Period,” Ron interjected. The two women glanced at him, wide-eyed. “It takes a delicate hand to knit skin with magic. It takes an even finer hand to keep it from scarring. It almost ”

“So, we keep it from scarring,” Emmeline whispered. She shook herself, slapping her cheeks lightly and she stood, shaking her head. “But, that’s not...main concern is stopping her from *dying*. Scars are whistles and bells. We’ve got *bandages* holding her organs in. We’re keeping her alive on stasis. She’s going to need to eat soon, but her stomach is basically in shreds.”

"There are plants that she can absorb through her bloodstream if injected. It's all magical, so she won't need to process it like normal food," Neville added.

Both Emmeline and Hermione’s heads whipped around to stare at him and he flushed under their stare.

“Can you get us the plants? And a full report? And maybe teach us how to give it to her?” Emmeline asked, frantically.

“Absolutely,” Neville said firmly. “Not even a question. I’ll figure out what exactly to give her. Get me a report on her nutrient balance, and I’ll figure out what...and you two figure out everything else.”

“You two can do it. If anyone can, it’s you two,” Ron said with so much earnestness in his voice Hermione let out a quiet laugh. Ron grinned down at her. He tapped the top of her head and rubbed. It frizzed up and Hermione weakly slapped his hand away. “Do you want your coconut oil shit?”

“Yeah. Thanks, arse. Good night,” Hermione sighed.

“Good night, hag,” Ron smirked. He gave a little wave to Emmeline and his grin softened into something more polite. “Good night, Em.”

“Goodbye, Ron,” Emmeline said, her voice paper thin. The door closed behind the trainees and Emmeline turned back to Hermione. “What about creating a spell?”

“Spell creation takes too long. We’d need to get it approved, and she’s got three days. Max. Does Spell Damage know anything that combats Dark magic originating from werewolves?”

“Doubt it. What about…”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry knocked lightly on the cracked door. The matron that had been tending to Lavender's wounds looked up from her work. Her stern gaze softened when she took in Harry's expression and she beckoned him in.

"Um...hi. I'm Harry," he whispered.

The matron sighed. "I know who you are, babe. I'm Demelza, the matron on your sister's case. How can I help you?"

"I'm...I'm off work, but I don't wanna go home," Harry said. He winced and wrapped his arms around himself and looked at her with wide eyes. "I don't...people will ask me questions if I go to an on-call room. And this is the Children Ward. No one...no one comes here."

"You want to sleep here?" Demelza asked, gently.

Harry nodded, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Y-yes, please."

And Demelza couldn't be much older than him. Truly, she was probably younger. Matrons could start right out of Hogwarts, unlike Healers, who had to get a few extra NEWTs and some further testing under their belts. She opened the door further for him and then closed it behind him. She turned back and waved her wand, Conjuring a small little cot right next to Lavender's bed.

"You've had a long day, Harry Potter," Demelza said.

He nodded, letting out a quiet hiccup.

"It's been a long life," Harry whispered back. He walked past Lavender, running his fingers over her knuckles, and murmured, "Happy Christmas, sis."

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her voice.

Happy Christmas, bro-bro.

Harry settled on the cot. He was too tired to cry. He folded his arms under his head and turned on his side so that if he lifted his head just so, he could see Lavender's hand and the end of her curls. Demelza pulled out a thin blanket from her stack and opened it, lieing it over him. "I don't want to go to sleep. What if she dies while I'm sleeping?"

"Get some sleep, Harry Potter. She'll make it through the night. I promise."

Harry yawned, his exhaustion finally settling over him. "First rule of being a Healer: don't make promises you can't keep."

His eyelids felt like weights were attached and there was sand in the corner of his eyes.

"Lucky that I'm a matron then. Now, go to sleep."

Harry yawned, and whispered to himself, “It’s a beautiful day to conquer death.”

And Harry did what he was told.

Chapter End Notes

First: Hand slipped. Again. It happens when you're bored at an airport all day. I had nothing else to do.

Second: I wrote this entire chapter to repeats of Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol and How to Save a Life by the Fray. Those are staple Grey’s Anatomy songs for sadness.

Third: Might be a while before I update because I want to focus on the Fairest Saga and Showmen. Also, my first day of classes is tomorrow.

EDIT (Citations):

Once more, the Hela Wasting Curse is mentioned! :)

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Lily.”

Albus’ eyes softened as Lily emerged from the room, shutting it quietly behind her. She looked at him with that same detachment that she regarded everyone with, but Albus remembered a younger Lily with all the fire that he saw in her son’s eyes. She couldn’t hide the exhaustion from him. She couldn’t hide the anger and grief from *Albus*, who has trained her.

“Albus, it’s good to see you,” Lily said with a tiny smile.

“Severus said he saw you briefly yesterday,” Albus began.

Lily sighed, shaking her head. "I had work to do and you know...Severus is...Severus. Sometimes, I feel like he wants my entire world to stop so I can accommodate him," Lily confessed in a soft whisper.

Albus smiled. So, Lily was still Lily. She would still confide in him. Good. Now, he just had to do her the same courtesy. His smile nearly dropped as he thought of Harry and Tom.

“He’ll understand. You have much to do,” Albus said. “You brought your students.”

“I couldn’t just leave them,” Lily said. “They’re my team.”

“Have they met...Harry?” Albus asked.

Lily snorted, nodding. “Yeah. Draco and Harry met. Harry was confrontational. Draco was rude. But, I’m not going to mediate that. He’s not a child.”

“No,” Albus admitted. “He isn’t. Harry is very much not a child.”

"But, he's my child," Lily whispered. She looked up at Albus as if she were expecting something from him as if she were waiting for him to confess his sins.

Albus kept up his genial smile.

“How is young Lavender?”

"They have to wake her up today. Are you on call?" Lily asked. "I...I know your Ward is good. They have to be. But, I only trust...*you*. With her mind. If she’s…”

Lily trailed off, taking a deep breath and nodded, collecting herself once more.

“I am here in any capacity that you need me to be, Lily.”

“Thank you, Albus. James and I are...eternally grateful. She has a good team behind her. Harry vouches for Vance and the trainee, Granger. Bellatrix is remarkable, as always,” Lily admitted, and she sounded bitter about that. Albus’ smile widened. Tom’s trio and Lily had never quite seen eye to eye. Ego always blinded. “He slept in there last night.”

“I’m not surprised,” Albus said.

“Neither am I,” Lily said quietly. “He is...angry. With me. He is right to be, I think. But, I don’t know how to...explain to him. What I am. How I am. I don’t *know*.”

“You can only tell him the truth,” Albus admitted, and even this, he wasn’t sure about.

He wasn't sure why Lily held Harry at arm's length. He wasn't sure why Lily winced at the idea of Harry working at St. Mungo's. He wasn't sure why she had appeared, begging for him to reject Harry, and when Albus had refused to do so, why she had begged to be put on a sabbatical instead. Albus wasn't sure why Lily was so terrified to see her son's talent.

“I can’t tell him what I did. What I asked you to do,” Lily said, quietly. “He will hate me. More than he does. I have given him a lot of reasons, Albus. I have. Fuck...I’m selfish.”

Albus frowned, heavily. “You can...well, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

Lily looked away as if she could hear the lie Albus was trying to convince himself of.

She opened her mouth to respond again when they heard a commotion.

“Bella, Tom! How are—”

“WHAT THE *FUCK* ARE YOU DOING HERE, YOU PIECE OF SHIT?”

Lily’s eyes widened and she took a hesitant step, peering down the corridor. Albus winced as he saw the trio. Bellatrix was fuming, already storming away with red sparks trailing after her. Lily gasped, throwing the door open and rushing back in as she realized that Bellatrix was on the floor for *her* daughter. Albus observed as Tom shoved the man’s chest, causing him to stumble back.

“Come on, man. Physical violence?” the man groaned as he brushed his robes off.

“Yeah, physical violence. What the *fuck* are you doing here, Rodolphus?” Tom hissed.

Rodolphus Lestrange grinned his roguish smile and winked.

“I’ve heard a lot of rumors, Tommy-boy. Fucking Evans’ kid? *Nice*,” Rodolphus grinned.

Albus frowned. Albus had forgotten how unnecessarily crass Rodolphus could be, and perhaps, he should’ve opened the man’s letter. At least, he would’ve been able to *warn* Tom. Still, Rodolphus had said something quite nasty about Harry, and Tom was fuming, his face ashen at his words.

So, Albus didn't stop Tom's fist from flying right into Rodolphus' face.
He didn't feel bad about it.

DIAGNOSIS

"Okay, so...we know where to start, eh?" Emmeline asked, jittery from the amount of coffee in her system. Hermione had consumed the same amount but, Emmeline guessed that she processed it differently. Instead, Hermione was so still that if Emmeline touched her, she might shatter.

"We start on the organs attached to arteries. I work bottom up, you work bottom up down. We meet in the middle," Hermione recited back to Emmeline. She tilted her head, looking at Emmeline with narrowed eyes. "How do we bind it?"

"I was looking through spellbooks. If we modify *Reparo*—" Emmeline began.

"Very risky." Hermione winced as if she realized what she had said. "I mean, maybe—"

"No, you're right. Too risky. Not enough time," Emmeline agreed. She gave Hermione a tiny smile and pulled her pocket watch free. Nearly noon. "We have to pull her out of stasis soon. If she's stable enough."

"Why?" Hermione asked curiously.

"To see if she can talk. Or be lucid. Or...we need to make sure there's brain activity. If not, we call Dumbledore in early," Emmeline said.

"Early?"

Emmeline nodded. "He needs to be there...after we finish up. To deal with the aftermath. The girl's going to need therapy. Physical and mental. A shit ton of therapy, Merlin," Emmeline muttered, shaking her head as she spoke to herself.

"She's tough," Hermione said.

Emmeline raised an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"She went up against werewolves and lived. And if she's anything like Harry, she's tough as hell."

Emmeline snorted.

"Can't exactly disagree. The whole family is a bunch of badasses, aren't they?" Emmeline asked with a tiny grin. "Fucking Lily Evans, James Potter, and now Harry and Lavender. Fucking badasses all around."

“You swear a lot,” Hermione observed.

“Only when I’m stressed. And I think that’s Ron’s influence,” Emmeline said, watching Hermione carefully, all of the camaraderie from before hidden away, as if it all depended on Hermione’s response.

“You’re friends with him,” Hermione murmured. She looked at Emmeline with a tiny smile. “He’s a good guy. A bit of an arse, but a good guy. He says you’re the reason he’s gotten into grimy pubs.”

“He talks about me?” Emmeline whispered.

Hermione wanted to tell her the truth. *No*, Ron didn’t talk about her. Not much. Only in passing. Only when Neville, Hermione, and Harry asked if he wanted to go out with them. He never mentioned Emmeline any other time. There was too much to do, too much of their own shit happening in their heads and in their house to think about Ron’s friend. Friend? Girlfriend? Hermione wasn’t sure.

Hermione wanted to tell her the truth. But...*but*...

“Yeah, he talks about you,” Hermione said with a tiny smile.

Emmeline beamed, relaxing, and she looked back down at her work with a grin.

Hermione’s smile dropped.

Emmeline needed to focus on Lavender. Lavender was Harry’s sister, which made her family. And they took care of family in Hermione’s house. If Hermione had to lie to this woman, she fucking would, because she needed Emmeline to *focus*.

Hermione opened her mouth to suggest something else when a shower of sparks erupted from both Hermione and Emmeline’s wands. Emmeline blanched as they looked at the dark red sparks.

“Lavender. Fuck,” Emmeline hissed. She jumped up and was already running from the room.

Hermione was right on her heels, eyes wide as the bound down the hall and up the stairs. The lift would take too long and Hermione thanked every god that the Children Ward was only one floor up. They erupted on the floor and flew to the room.

Hermione looked inside. Dumbledore, Bellatrix, Riddle, and an unknown man were already in the room. Lily was in the corner, standing next to Harry, her hand wrapped around his wrist.

Harry didn’t even seem to notice, staring as Tom stepped back, standing at Dumbledore’s side as Bellatrix and the man got to work.

Harry couldn’t bear to look at Lavender as the blood sluggishly spilled down her body.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Bellatrix spat between clenched teeth as she used the Siphoning Charm to get a clear view of the wound that had opened up. Lavender’s throat.

Harry's eyes widened as he looked at the trio. Tom's fists were clenched tight against his side, and Harry took note of his bruised knuckles. The man already had a bruise blooming black on his jaw. The man ignored Bellatrix's questions, easily going towards Lavender's body, taking note of her wounds.

“Werewolf wounds. She’s in stasis and bleeding. Why didn’t you cauterize the wounds with silver, Bella?” the man asked immediately.

“Because cauterizing them scars her, you imbecile. Do you know who she is, Lestrange?” Tom barked.

The man grinned. “Does it matter?”

“That’s *my* daughter, Rodolphus,” Lily said, firmly.

And Harry’s eyes widened as he finally recognized who this man was.

Rodolphus Lestrange.

Tom’s ex-best friend. Bellatrix’s ex-lover. The reason that it had all fallen apart, and Harry wasn’t sure if it was possible to adore and hate someone all at once, but he felt both for the man before him. The man that had broken up Tom and Bellatrix, and the man that had taken them both apart with his own selfishness.

“Ah, I see. Want her nice and pretty and mentally stable when she sees herself,” Rodolphus jeered with a grin. Lily rolled her eyes, glaring over at him.

“No, I want her whole, Lestrange,” Emmeline barked. “She’s *my* patient, and I will stop the bleeding myself. I don’t want your wishy-washy work all over her. It’s all superficial bleeding right now. We’ll bandage her, change the dressings every few hours to keep it from scabbing over and healing.”

“Can it even do that?” Hermione asked.

Emmeline tilted her head. “Yes. Now, I’m going to ask all non-essential personnel to step out while I work on the patient. Family included.”

“You can’t do that,” Lily began immediately.

“*I’m* the Healer on this case, Healer Evans. I know you’re quite famous and all, but I’m *really* going to need you to step out. Granger, get them out of her,” Emmeline said, immediately. She barely spared them another glance before she raised her wand to cleanse the wound. She moved her wand in smooth twirling motion. “*Akestor.*”

Harry wasn’t allowed to see much else as Hermione approached, a mildly apologetic look on her face as she ushered everyone out.

“You’ll keep me updated?” Harry asked.

Hermione smiled. “Well, of course. Are you coming home tonight?”

“I don’t know yet,” Harry said softly. “I’ll let you know.”

“Sure thing. Also, do me a favor,” Hermione called as Harry backed out of the doorway. “Go see Ron and Neville. They’re worried.”

DIAGNOSIS

Lily wasn't surprised when he showed up. He wasn't surprised that she wasn't surprised. Good. She'd need him to keep up. Lily leaned back in her chair as Riddle walked into the room as if it weren't strange for him to be in the Children Ward again. He'd been on his way to Lavender's room earlier, anyway. Lily's eyes narrowed.

She *knew* how much Riddle despised children.

“Tom, congratulations are in orders,” Lily said as a greeting.

"Your congratulations are well-received, Lily," Riddle drawled as he swaggered in as he owned the place. His eyes dragged over the room at a whole, passing over Lavender's still body as if she were barely a blip on his radar. He hesitated for a half-second on the messy cot by her bed. It was a half-second too long. Lily almost smiled.

Got you.

“I’ve heard many a-whispers, Tom, about your project. I daresay, even if I had decided to enter for the grant, I wouldn’t have gotten it,” Lily admitted. She was old enough—her ego sated enough—to admit that. Riddle was brilliant. That couldn’t be denied. Ever.

“No, you wouldn’t have. This is my life’s work. Culminating in one project. It’ll change the face of medicine as we know it,” Riddle observed, so cock-sure of himself.

What a fucking dick.

Lily nearly smiled. Sometimes, her inner voice reminded her of her foul-mouthed son.

Riddle continued, “How is your daughter?”

“She’s...well, she made it through the first night,” Lily said.

“Then, as long as she comes out of stasis, she’ll live. Presuming Vance knows what she’s doing,” Riddle said, callous as ever.

Lily nodded. “Harry said she’s good. He works here,” Lily said. She tilted her head, observing Riddle for a long time. “I’ve heard that you teach him. You’re his teacher.”

“Not precisely. McGonagall is his team leader. He’s just very talented,” Riddle said, carefully choosing his words. Lily resisted the urge to snort.

“He assisted on an internal procedure on his first day. He must be...talented,” Lily drawled.

Riddle was watching her now, staring right into her eyes, as if trying to tear her into pieces. There was something there. Before, there had been resentment and professional competitiveness. But, now there was something more. Something like rage and disgust and frighteningly, *judgment*.

“Your son is remarkable,” Riddle began. “Harry is...just good.”

And his voice went soft. So soft. Lily hadn’t heard Riddle’s voice do that before.

“I know. But, he seems...emotional. He’s always been an emotional boy. But, it never affected his ambitions. And yet, he seems...almost unfocused. He hasn’t been on anyone’s service since Lavender was admitted,” Lily said, coolly.

Riddle raised an eyebrow and his expression was cold again. “I imagine that’s what happens when your sister is dying.”

She lost control.

“*You’re* what happened to him," Lily said, her voice sharp as barbed wire as she looked Riddle in the eye.

Riddle’s expression didn’t flicker, staring back at her with those flat burgundy eyes. Lily scoffed. Riddle was exactly Harry’s type too. Tall. Dark. Talented.

“You’re not here for my daughter or to greet me after my trip. Let’s not pretend. We’ve always been equals, Tom. And I respected you as a colleague though we’ve had our personal differences. But, you’re here for him,” Lily said, so cold that if Riddle were anyone else, he would’ve flinched from her wintery eyes. Lily crossed her arms, leaning back against the wall. She glanced over at her sleeping daughter, her scarred little girl.

“Healer Evans—” Tom began.

“You’re the Head of Spell Damage. No wonder he’s so unfocused,” Lily hissed, bitingly. “You know, Tom...I always knew. Men like you...are *always* threatened by those with potential to rival, if not surpass, them. You just want someone to admire you. And you don’t care about the damage you do to him along the way.”

“Your son is an adult,” Riddle retorted.

“And alas, he’s still my son,” Lily snarled.

Riddle's eyes narrowed. "Funny that. He doesn't talk about you. Actually, the only time we've had a meaningful conversation about you is when he told me your response to his endeavor to be a Healer. So, maybe...*you're* what damaged him."

Lily winced. She twitched at the triumph on Riddle's face and glared up at him. Slowly, she stood up and shoved her chair, allowing it to scrape across the ground.

"My relationship with my son is my own. *Your* relationship with my son is...well, *non-existent.*"

DIAGNOSIS

"Harry!"

"Harry!"

Harry collapsed against Ron and Neville as they rushed towards him, wrapping their arms around him. He hugged them back, pressing his eyes against Neville's shoulder to stop them from burning with tears. He pulled back, an exhausted smile on his face.

"Hey, you two," Harry rasped.

Ron sighed, relieved. "We were fucking worried about you, mate. How are you doing?" Ron asked.

"How do you think he's doing?" Neville snapped, surprisingly nasty in his worry.

Harry's eyebrows flew up.

"I'm...going to be fine," Harry allowed. "Lavender just had a bit of a scare. Her wounds opened up. But, she's being treated."

"Good. That's good. McGonagall gave you the time off until your sister is well," Ron said with a smile. "I mean Neville and I are going to be working overtime to cover, but *totally* worth it."

Harry felt his heart swell and he gave a real smile, then.

"You two are...the actual best," Harry said with a grin.

Neville nodded. "We know," he said. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," Harry said. He let them draw him deeper into the cafeteria. He was well-practiced with ignoring everyone's stares now. To be honest, he felt better about the stares when it had all been about him fucking Tom. He could deal with everyone thinking he was a massive slut.

Now, the stares were full of pity.

The three grabbed their trays, heeping it full of carb-loaded foods. Harry got a plate of chips and a sandwich. Hermione wasn't there to steal from. He knew that the chips wouldn't taste as good if he wasn't filching them from her, but it was food. And he needed the energy.

They settled at a different table, ignoring Smith, Patil and Abbott's curious stares.

"So, Healers on your sister's case?" Neville asked.

"Bellatrix, of course. She brought her in. She was...nice, you know," Harry began as he munched on one of his chips. Neville looked at him with so much surprise that Harry nearly choked with laughter. "Yeah, she was as nice as Bellatrix *can* be. She said she wasn't going to ever break her oath."

"So...she did the bare minimum?" Ron asked through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

It was so normal that Harry almost..*felt* normal.

"Yeah, basically," Harry admitted. "And Hermione and Vance, obviously. And...Rodolphus Lestrange showed up."

"Who?" Neville asked.

"Tom's ex-best friend. The one...who Bellatrix cheated with," Harry said quietly.

Ron and Neville looked up immediately. Ron gaped.

"Shut the fuck up," Ron hissed.

"I'm serious," Harry said, nodding.

Neville shook his head, confused. "That's...going to require further dissecting. Later on. How are you doing...with your mum here?"

Harry faltered. "We haven't...had a real conversation? At least, not yet. We almost fought when she first showed up. But, Lavender comes first. I think that's something we *both* can agree on."

Ron leaned forward, curious about his friend's mother when his eyes narrowed on something. Harry glanced over his shoulder and grimaced.

"Harry Potter," Malfoy drawled in his this French accent, syrupy and *annoying* as fuck. "Shouldn't you be working?"

"I'm on leave, Malfoy. Shouldn't you be kissing Lily's ass?" Harry snarled. He turned back around to face his friends.

"Won't you introduce us, Potter?" Malfoy asked. "I will introduce you."

Harry frowned, looking over his shoulder again. Malfoy wasn't alone. Another figure stood next to him. She was just as pale as him, and if Harry was honest, he'd compare the two to Veela, if much colder and stranger. There was something about the woman though...she looked almost familiar, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Who are these pricks?" Ron muttered under his breath.

"The guy is Draco Malfoy. My mother's student," Harry snapped.

Malfoy preened as he sidled up to the table, looking down at Harry's friends with distaste.

"And *you* are?" Malfoy drawled.

"Neville Longbottom."

"Ron Weasley."

Malfoy scoffed. "I've never 'eard of either of you. At least, Potter has good...what is it, Astoria? Ah...breeding," Malfoy said, full of spite and nastiness.

Neville winced and his hand flashed out, grabbing Ron's shoulder and pushing him back as the man began to rise to his full height.

"Aren't you going to introduce your colleague?" Neville asked, stiffly. Harry looked at him, proudly. Neville hadn't even flinched at Malfoy's barb.

"Astoria Greengrass. I am pleased to make your acquaintance," the young woman said.

Harry froze. Her voice wasn't as bubblegum sweet, but that sing-song in her voice was still clear as day. He knew her. He *knew* her.

She had watched Tom and him.

And Harry was terrified.

He turned to look at her and she was staring at him, amusement in the corner of her eyes.

"You *do* speak English then," Harry said coldly.

"Far better than my counterpart," Astoria said sweetly. Her accent wasn't as pronounced now, tamer than Malfoy's.

"But, of course, English does not matter when you have the talent to attract such attention from the Lily Evans. We were selected by her. Especially," Malfoy said with his prideful smirk.

Harry's lips curled as he looked at the pair of them. Astoria was watching him. She had seen...she had seen him and Tom. She was his mother's student, and Harry knew where her loyalties lied. He trembled.

What if his mother...what if Lily knew?

"Does that make you feel...special?" Harry hissed, spite poisoning his voice, twisting the expression on his face into something ugly. Astoria raised a single eyebrow while Draco reared back as if surprised by the depth of Harry's rage. "That she...*chose* you. You want to be chosen by a woman like that?"

"'A woman like that?'" Astoria repeated, slowly.

"Lily Evans is *fucked up*," Harry said, his voice dipping lower on those words.

"They say the same about you here," Astoria observed.

And oh, Harry hated *her*. Maybe even more than he hated Malfoy because Astoria was cold. And calculating. And he could see why his mother had brought her into the fold. It was probably like staring at a reflection.

"She's cold and absent and the only reason she has any time for you is because she's too busy trying to save the damn world instead of her own kids. She's a soulless automaton, so fucking controlled that she's almost unfeeling. Yeah, maybe I am fucked up. But, she made me that way," Harry hissed.

Astoria tilted her head, observing him quietly. "You should take responsibility for your own unhappiness instead of blaming everyone else. You should let yourself be happy."

"I'd be happy if I didn't have *that* for a mother," Harry snarled.

Astoria blinked once, then twice. Harry looked across the table at his friends, but they weren't looking at him. Ron's cheeks were red and he looked anywhere but at Harry, awkwardly. Neville looked just above Harry's head in dismay.

"*Guérisseur* Evans," Astoria said, cheerfully.

Harry froze when a hand landed on his shoulder. He looked up and winced.

Lily stared down at him, her expression impassive as she regarded him with his own eyes.

"Mum," Harry began and then stopped.

He didn't know what to say.

"They've brought your sister out of stasis and explained the situation to her. She is resting again," Lily said carefully.

"Mum," Harry repeated.

Lily closed her eyes and ran her fingers through his hair, rubbing his scalp as she might've when he was younger. Then, she opened her eyes again.

"We need to talk. Later," Lily decided. "Not now."

“Okay. Later,” Harry decided.

Lily let out a long sigh. “I’ll be in your sister’s room,” she said. She glanced at her students with narrowed eyes. “Stop antagonizing the people that work here. Don’t you have work to do?”

“*Oui, Guérisseur*,” they both said in creepy unison.

“*Allez faire votre travail*,” Lily snapped quickly.

The two sprung into action, walking away, their heads bent low as they conversed in quick spitting French. Lily took a deep breath and looked at her son’s friends.

“I look forward to meeting you both in the near future,” Lily said, pulling herself together once more, calm and controlled.

“Um...it would be our pleasure, Healer Evans,” Neville said.

Lily still hadn’t let go of Harry. Harry swallowed.

I’d be happy if I didn’t have that for a mother.

“I’ll see you in a bit, Mum,” Harry said. “We’ll talk.”

Lily nodded, finally letting go of him. “It’s been a long time coming, Harry.”

Harry didn’t disagree.

DIAGNOSIS

The first thing she noticed: everything was red and blue and green and then her eyes fluttered open and everything was violently white. It was so bright and white that her stomach turned and she would spew bile if there was anything inside of her.

The second thing she noticed: there was nothing inside of her. The middle of her felt endlessly hollow like she could reach in and feel nothing, which was impossible because she knew every single fucking organ in the human body, and she knew that there were few one could function without.

The last thing she noticed: the pain.

Fucking *hell*.

The agony.

She tried to scream, but there was no sound coming out. The agony was in her marrow. She could feel it cracking outward from her marrow, through the ivory of her bones, through her joints. It burned, not in the way fire did, but it burned all the same. She looked around, frantic and wild and tried to touch her hand to her throat, but when she did, she could only feel gauze.

A hoarse sound emerged.

“She can’t talk. Her vocal chords—”

“—temporary voice—”

“—Albus—”

She couldn't recognize those voices. She couldn't recognize anything except the agony and the blinding white, and she saw a girl—a pretty, black girl with large front teeth, and frizzy hair—who was leaning by her side, running her calloused fingertips over her forehead. She didn't know who she was. The girl. She didn't know who *she* was.

Where was she?

Why was she?

What was her name?

And why did it *hurt*?

“Hi, Lavender. I’m Hermione Granger. I think your brother has written about me in his letters,” the girl said with a kind, stern voice.

She blinked. Her brother...her *brother*…Harry.

The girl was still talking. "You've been in a very terrible accident. You can't talk right now because your vocal cords are damaged, but, Healer Dumbledore can give your thoughts voice, if that's something you want. Do you remember Healer Dumbledore?"

And the girl was stepping back, and she couldn’t see anything but the blinding white, and then, a flash of darkness—of fangs and the smell of copper (*blood)* and the feeling of her own skin being torn from her, of hands reaching inside of her and turning her inside out. She wanted to *scream*, but she couldn’t hear herself.

She wanted the girl back, but she couldn’t see her. Nothing but the terrifying white.

Another face. A face she recognized. No. Eyes she recognized. Bright blue eyes behind half-moon glasses. She nodded, frantically, whining, whimpering, but there was no real sound.

“Okay, Lavender. I’m going to give your thoughts a voice. All you need to do is imagine you’re saying it, and it’ll be there in the air,” Dumbledore said, and his wand was out and pressed to the middle of her forehead.

Something echoed in her head. A boom. Like an explosion. But, quieter. It felt like an explosion, but it was nearly silent, and then…

"Where am I? Who am I?"

She could hear herself. Her own voice, but her lips weren't moving. It was like she couldn't move, or it hurt too much to move.

"You're Lavender Brown-Potter, daughter of Lily Evans and James Potter. You've been in an accident," Dumbledore repeated.

Lavender. Her name was Lavender.

Okay.

"Albus. You're Albus Dumbledore. Mum's teacher. Am I at the hospital?"

"Yes. These are your Healers: Emmeline Vance and Hermione Granger. You're at St. Mungo's," Albus said, gently. He used to calm her like this when she would wander around the hospital when she was a kid and get lost. He would speak to her in that gentle, grandfatherly voice that would make her smile through the tears.

Lavender couldn't smile now, nor could she cry.

The wolves.

She remembers.

"Yes, the wolves," the girl—Hermione—said. She was holding Lavender's head. Lavender squeezed once, then twice.

"My brother does talk about you," she said. "*You're his person."*

Hermione froze, staring down at her. "I...I am," Hermione whispered.

"Good. He needs one," Lavender decided. This was the right one. Hermione looked tough as balls, but like she could be soft sometimes. Harry needed someone tough to bring him out of his sadness. He needed someone to stroke his hair too. "*It hurts really, really, really bad."*

"I know it does," another woman said. Healer Vance then. "You've been mauled. Werewolves targeted your abdomen, throat, and face."

Her face. Lavender's *face*. And maybe, it was a little vain, but Lavender loved her face.

She looked just like her birth mum.

That's what her Muggle grandmother always said. Her birth mum's mother.

"Can you fix it?"

"We're going to do our very best. We've been keeping you nourished with the use of plants being injected into your bloodstream through needles and your wounds. But, your wounds are open. They've been open for...too long," Healer Vance said.

Lavender heard everything she didn't want to say. You're dying, is what she wanted to say. And Lavender could feel that. She could feel herself drifting away, the agony receding and then crashing back over her. Perhaps, she preferred the pain now. It let her know that she was alive.

"I told the wolf...to go fuck himself."

He tried to tear her apart. Break her into pieces. And she refused to scream. *Go fuck yourself.*

Hermione grinned. "Good girl," she commended.

"Where's my dad? Where's Sirius? And Remus? And Harry?"

"Your dad is at the Ministry. Harry is eating. I imagine Sirius and Remus are with your father as well," Albus reported. "Your mother is getting her affairs in order."

Lavender's eyes widened.

"Mum is here?"

"Of course she is. She loves you," Hermione said firmly.

Lavender rolled her eyes. She knew that. Lily just had a really hard time showing it. Lavender understood that—understood her. She could understand Lily because she was a bit of an outsider like Dad was. Harry would never understand. He could never understand. It would be like staring into a reflection—one didn't have to 'understand' their own reflection. They only needed to know that it was their reflection. Harry wouldn't get it until he just *knew*.

"What happens now?"

"We're going to put you back under so that you can gather your strength some more. You'll need it," Hermione said.

Lavender sighed. She rolled her head over to look at Hermione. She winced. Lavender could see the end of her blonde curls were copper. They had washed her hair but not all of the blood had come out so easily.

"Tell Harry I love him. Tell him that Mum loves him and Dad loves him and that he's not alone."

"You're not going to die," Hermione said firmly. Vance was waving her wand, carefully sliding the stasis charm into place.

Lavender finally smiled.

The white was fading away. It wasn't so threateningly, violently white anymore. Now, the blues and greens were returning and the pain receded into a dull roar in the back of Lavender's mind.

"My mum's a Healer. I know the rules." Lavender's mental voice began to slur as sleep threatened to overcome her. *"Rule one: Don't make promises you can't keep."*

DIAGNOSIS

James watched Sirius pace in front of his desk, muttering under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose. The Potter leaned back in his chair, letting out a sigh. Usually, that released all of his tension, but it had invaded every one of his senses. James wouldn't relax until his little girl was pulled back together again.

"This was a hit," Sirius repeated. "You know it. I know it. We all know it. We still don't know why. Or who."

James scoffed. "It's not hard to guess who."

Sirius hummed, nodding slowly.

It wasn't.

Fenrir Greyback.

"Okay. Fenrir Greyback. But, we haven't done shit to him. He leaves us alone. We leave him alone. That's how it's always been," Sirius snarled. His hands clenched into fists at his side and he looked up at James, stopping his pacing. "James, I'm going to kill that fucking bastard."

James burned with the same urge.

But, he hadn't come to be the Head Auror on impulse, recklessness, and sheer dumb luck alone. That had been part of it—most of it, if he were being honest—but, he could wait. He could bide his time, though perhaps, the Ministry's brand of justice wasn't enough for Greyback's crimes. No, they weren't. But, he'd get his.

That James promised.

"We still don't know why," James said. He looked over at the board of information that he had been gathering for months. Most of that information had been gathered by Moody, while had infiltrated the adjacent packs. He wasn't a wolf, so they'd been suspicious, but he had provided. He frowned as he thought on Moody. "Moody was close. That's why he was hurt. But, Lavender has nothing to do with any of this. I've barely got anything to do with this case."

“You’re Head Auror. You’re the most visible of all of us. You’ve been the poster boy of the DMLE since you graduated the Academy,” Sirius pointed out.

James snorted, nodding. “You’re right. But, if it’s about visibility...then he could’ve just attacked me. No, this was personal. This was something personal.”

James leaned forward, steepling his fingers as he thought about it. Even as he thought about the case, his mind wandered to the image of Lavender. Lavender's broken bleeding body, her back arched tight as a bow, her eyes rolling into back of her head in pain. She had been resting in a puddle of her own blood on the doorstep. And he was overwhelmed with another flood of rage.

What did you do, James?

James shivered. Harry’s question would haunt him until he found the answer. But, his voice...the look on his face...that would be the supporting star of James’ dreams for a long time. The star...well Lavender’s state spoke for itself, didn’t it?

“What are you thinking?” Sirius asked.

“I’m thinking about Harry,” James answered honestly.

Sirius winced. “Yeah. How do you...how do you think he’s doing with Lily?”

“I...I think I have to get back soon before they kill each other,” James said with a lazy glance. “They’re far too similar for their own good.”

"Shouldn't that mean that they'd get along better than you and him?" Sirius challenged.

James frowned. “You’d think that, wouldn’t you?”

Sirius shook his head and leaned forward.

“I don’t get it, James. This was a hit. This was *personal*. Like, I’d get it if you were Umbridge, but we don’t get involved in politics. We don’t discriminate. I mean, clearly. My partner is a werewolf. We don’t give a fuck about this—” Sirius complained.

They both stopped, looking at one another.

“Oh, *fuck*,” James whispered.

Sirius swallowed. “Umbridge.”

James nodded. “And...Remus. And *me.*”

“And me,” Sirius murmured.

James looked over at Sirius and then at the board.

“And you.”

DIAGNOSIS

“She was right,” Hermione repeated as they began to crash again. It was nearly seven and they still weren’t any closer than they had been a day and a half ago. Emmeline looked up from her notes, yawning stiffly behind her hand.

“Who was right?” Emmeline asked, sipping delicately at her third cup of tea.

Hermione frowned. “Lavender was right. Rule one: ‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep’.”

“You didn’t,” Emmeline said firmly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “She’s going to die.”

“No, she’s not,” Emmeline retorted.

“You’re going to heal her,” Ron supplied unhelpfully as he sorted through Emmeline’s files.

He had come again to drop off food and more coffee and had found himself roped into organizing the disregarded ideas and the ‘maybe' pile. The ‘maybe' pile was much, much, *much* smaller than the ideas that Hermione and Emmeline had decided against.

Hermione sneered. “Are we really? Tell that to all the ideas we *don’t* have, Ron,” Hermione snapped.

Ron’s eyes hardened. “So, you’re going to give up?”

“Did I fucking say that?” Hermione retorted.

“You just as good as!” Ron roared.

He was on his feet and so was Hermione, glowering up at him. Neither noticed Emmeline’s eyes darting between the pair of them, taking in the animosity and charge between the pair of them. Hermione’s hands clenched into a fist.

“It’s not as easy as just mending a teapot. No quick *Reparo* will fix this. I can’t just sew her up like she’s a fucking tea in my robes!” Hermione shouted.

Emmeline dropped her teacup and it shattered on her desk. The brown liquid soaked right through her parchment. Ron and Hermione’s heads turned to look at her, the tension between them snapping easily.

“What is it, Em?” Ron asked, softly.

Emmeline trembled as she looked at Hermione. Slowly, she stood, walking up to her. She pressed her hands to Hermione’s cheek. Hermione’s lips curled.

“Why is your face so close to mine?” Hermione hissed.

“You can,” Emmeline whispered. “You *can* just sew her up. We can. *Sew. Her. Up.*”

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat.

“We can sew her up,” Hermione whispered back. “It’s...that’s how Muggles do it. Muggles...we can sew her closed. We can...holy *shit*. Holy shit.”

Ron’s eyes widened.

“That’s...that sounds barbaric,” he muttered.

Emmeline shook her head, staring at Hermione in wonder, not even sparing Ron a glance. “No. No, it’s not. Muggles open with scalpels. They close with stitches. They graft. They...they’re brilliant. Hermione, *you’re* brilliant. We can sew her up,” Emmeline said and she pulled away, stumbling towards the board. “Bugger, where are the markers? *Accio* marker!”

A purple marker flew into her hand and Emmeline took it to the board. She pointed it at the figure’s throat, the drawings smudged overnight.

“The vocal cord will be easiest. It was just...torn a little. Sew it closed. The superficial wounds...the skin is mostly there. Anything that isn’t can be *grown* with a potion. Sew it closed, cut off the excess. We have to do it by hand, though. We can’t do it with magic. Magic would corrupt it. Try to take it too fast. This has to be slow. This has to be *delicate*,” Emmeline said firmly.

Hermione nodded, frantically excited as she looked at it.

“Yes. *Yes.* But, not all Muggle. Organs. The organs can’t be replaced or grown. You need to take them from something and we don’t have anything for that. We don’t have magical organs. And the sutures need to be strong. Powerful. Not anything normal. The magic will dissolve normal thread,” Hermione said.

Emmeline nodded. “Not only that. Werewolves wounds are cursed. Inherently. We need something to counteract that. We haven’t figured that out.”

We need something...something that’ll help with the scarring and the Darkness,” Hermione said and she closed her eyes, thinking of all the thread that was made.

She thought back, thought about cleaning Grimmauld Place, and going through the many dressers, and finally wands and gowns. Beautiful gowns with silver threading falling from it. Broken wands with a single hair connecting them. But what...

“What are you thinking, hag?” Ron demanded, coming up to her, grabbing her by the shoulders.

Hermione’s eyes flashed open and her lips parted. A hoarse sound emerged.

“Come on, you hag. What is it?” Ron asked again.

Hermione hissed it out. “*Unicorn* hair. We sew her up with *unicorn* hair.”

Emmeline let out a whooping shriek as she spun around. Ron stared down at Hermione in wonder. His eyes blazed with something like triumph and more. His lips curled into a beatific smile.

“You’re fucking brilliant, you witch,” Ron hissed and then he was dipping his head, pressing his lips to hers and Hermione froze under his touch, her eyes wide.

Emmeline fell silent. Ron pulled back, sharply, looking down at Hermione in shock. Hermione raised one trembling hand to her mouth.

Her mouth burned. Everywhere burned. She was on fire. The skin on her thighs tingled and her fingertips felt numb. She'd never felt like that before. Hermione had never been kissed like that before, and she wished...she wished she had kissed back. Ron took a step backward, looking at Hermione in bewilderment.

“I...we have to work,” Hermione whispered. “We have to...learn how to sew. We have to...help Harry’s sister.”

“Yeah. You do,” Ron whispered back. His eyes flicked down to her lips again and then he turned on his heel, walking out of the office without another word.

Hermione forced herself to turn to look at Emmeline.

And Emmeline looked crushed. For just a moment, Hermione saw how heartbroken she was, how devastated, and then, another moment passed and Emmeline was staring at her with a coldness that nearly made Hermione flinch. But, Hermione didn’t flinch. She knew.

“We’re going to save this girl,” Emmeline said firmly.

Hermione nodded once, pushing away everything personal. She took a deep breath.

“We’re going to save this girl.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry stood by the door. He took a deep breath.

It was later.

He knew what Hermione would tell him. *Enough*. He couldn’t get hysterical. It would be just like him, but this was it. This was the confrontation—the moment—that Harry had been

waiting for his entire life. His mother was behind that door, with father, probably, and she was waiting for him. She had said later. It was later.

He cracked the door and walked inside.

Lily sat behind her desk, James at her side, as always. Lily's eyes snapped away from James to him and she gestured towards the chair across the desk. Harry walked towards it briskly and sat down. He looked at Lily patiently.

"It's later. Let's talk," Harry said coldly.

Lily was hesitating. She looked over at James.

"We know that our relationship isn't as...settled as it should be. There's a lot of resentment in the air, and it...Lily and I, we made mistakes. A lot of them. Concerning you and Lavender. We worked too much. We thought...well, we treated you like mini adults instead of children, and that takes a toll. But...Harry, you hold a lot of resentment. And rage. Directed at us," James said, breathing out heavily and he sounded *old.*

Harry had never heard his dad sound so damn old. Still, he didn't respond, preferring to watch Lily.

"Directed at me," Lily corrected. James looked down at her, surprised. "You're angry with me. Resentful of me."

"Yes," Harry bit out because there was no point in lying.

She'd heard him earlier. She'd heard what he thought of her.

"You think I'm cold and unfeeling and a shitty mother," Lily said. She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. "And you thought you hurt my feelings."

James froze. "Harry...you said that?" James asked, sounding so fucking wounded that Harry wanted to fucking cry and punch him in the face at the same time.

"I didn't?" Harry asked.

Lily leaned back in her chair. "No. You didn't. I know I'm a shitty mother."

"Then, why don't you fucking change?" Harry demanded.

"Why don't you?" Lily asked, her voice cold. Harry's eyes widened. "I made you my victim, Harry? You're a victim of your own rage. It makes you unfocused. When you become a victim of your rage, you become common. You become *ordinary*."

And that word grated. *Ordinary*.

Harry Potter was many things—angry, heartbroken, and bitter, in love and beloved, and all in between, but he was *anything* but fucking ordinary.

“You wanna know *why* I’m so unfocused? So ordinary?” Harry growled out as he looked at the redheaded woman with green eyes that stared at him in the reflection every morning. “You wanna know what happened to me? *You*! You happened to me!”

Lily’s eyes widened.

“Harry…” she began and she actually had the audacity to reach for him.

“*No*,” Harry said, slapping her hand away. “My biggest problem is you. I want to please you. Part of me loves you just as much as I *hate* you. And I can’t handle this...I’m a human *traffic* accident.”

“And that’s my fault?” Lily hissed.

“Yes!” Harry roared. He laughed, bitterly shaking his head. “I can see why you chose Astoria over your own fucking kids. She’s just like you. Cold and mean and *hateful*.”

“What is that you want from me?” Lily demanded. “I never...you never *tell* me. You expect me to just know. Like I’m a Legilimens. Tell me! What do you want from me?”

"I want you to tell me you're proud of me. I want you to understand why I am angry and I want…" Harry stopped because he didn't know what he wanted.

He had spent so long being angry, he no longer *knew*.

Lily stared at him, waiting, and she looked away, just as stubborn as he was.

“Lily…” James began. “Harry isn’t asking for much. He is asking for his mother’s support. His mother’s *love*.”

Lily trembled. “Her name, her *blessing*…”

“Her love,” Harry bit out. And then, his voice softened. “Her love.”

Lily scoffed, turning away.

“He’s just like you,” James said, gently and Lily threw her hands up, her green eyes burning as bright as Harry’s did when he was getting ready to spit rage.

“You think I don’t *know* that?” Lily roared at James. Harry jumped, rocking back in his chair. “He *is* me! He is talented! He has the potential for greatness! They said all those things about *me*, too, James. All the fire, the fury, the drive. The pitiless ambition! I look into his eyes and I see *myself*. You expect me to love that?”

Harry’s face went slack.

He saw it there, too. All of that burning rage. Lily had always been like ice to him. Or diamonds. Even with her bright hair, she was controlled and together. She very rarely lost her temper. When she was angry with him—after Harry had done something to get her attention

—she had treated him with indifference. Her indifference hurt more. But, this was something he could recognize. The bitterness and all that rage.

He could finally see why Dumbledore had said those words to him: *You're the spitting image of your mother.*

"I pity you. I pity me. I pity you," Harry murmured to himself as he looked at Lily. "You don't love yourself, Mum?"

And she cracked, her shoulders sagging and rounding as she buried her face in her hands, trembling with the force of the sobs that she kept trapped in her chest. James looked at them, lost. Harry slid forward in his seat, his fingers wrapping around Lily's wrist, pulling one hand away from her face. Her lips were pressed into a firm line, twitching as if she were keeping everything in. Her eyes were glossy. Even then, she was so controlled.

She had snapped and then had reeled it in so fast that it was almost gone again.

"Harry James Potter…my firstborn. My flesh and blood," Lily whispered, forcing the words out as if it hurt. "I love you more than there are stars. I love you to the ever-expanding edges of the universe. But, I...you remind me far too much of myself to ever...it is hard sometimes. And it's not your fault. It is *hard* to see…"

She stopped, frustrated. Harry squirmed with that frustration.

"Why can't you ever say what you *mean*?" Harry demanded. "You always...you always *do* this!"

Lily let out a shuddering breath. "It is *hard*, Harry, for me. Do you know what it was like...when I joined this profession? I was the *only* woman in my trainee class. And if I lost...*control* or got too...emotional...it was because I am a Muggleborn. Because I am a woman. Because...pick your reason. So, yes, it is *hard* for me to do anything but be in control. Can you please...let me get there?"

Harry swallowed, letting go of her wrist and nodding slowly. "Yes," he whispered.

Lily turned her face away, looking up at James.

"You can do this, love," James whispered to her.

Lily nodded, shaking out her shoulders as she turned to Harry. "I was absent. I work too much. I am...emotionally unavailable when I shouldn't be. I am too ambitious. And I am confident in my abilities to the point of arrogance. When I was younger, I was reckless and I burned. You remind me of me, and that is hard to see, Harry. It is hard for me to see my son...my *only* son...make my mistakes."

And Harry looked at her and knew that she knew. She knew about *Tom*.

"It wasn't a mistake," Harry whispered.

Lily's lips curled into sharp, bracing smile. "Wasn't it?" she whispered. "I've said things. Done things. Things I regret. But, there are other things that I don't regret either. Like when I said you wouldn't make it as a Healer. I won't ever regret that."

Harry's rage returned with a vengeance and he turned at her, gnashing his teeth like an animal.

"Why?" he spat. "You told me that 'I wouldn't survive it'. That I didn't have what it *takes.*"

Lily stood up, suddenly, her chair scraping against the ground. Harry gaped, staring up at her, that fury from before returning just as fast as his had.

"How...*dare* you?" Lily hissed. "I told you that you wouldn't survive it because you *won't,* Harry. Not because you don't have what it takes. This profession—if it can—will burn the *heart* right out of you because when you're faced with death like this...your heart becomes a problem. The problem is...is that you *do* have what it takes. You have talent. And when you have talent...you don't disappear into obscurity like others. You are *sanctified*, and there is *nothing* human or *living* about being a saint. Being a saint is about being a *martyr*. So *no* I never wanted this for you. I never wanted you to become *me.*"

Harry let out a hiss, and he got it. He *saw* it, then.

It was like looking at a reflection. And no one asked you to *understand* your reflection. Just see it. He could see what Dumbledore meant then more than anything else. It was the only thing that made sense.

You are the spitting image of your mother.

"That's my choice," Harry said quietly. Lily looked up at him with bright green eyes. "But, that's *my* choice. This is...this is what I want. I want this. I want to be the best."

"You 'want' this? This was never a choice," Lily hissed. Harry's eyes widened. "That's what I'm saying. That's what happens when you're great. When you're *extraordinary.* It's never a choice. It's expectation after expectation, and one day, you'll burn out. You won't *survive*. I didn't."

"I'll be better than you," Harry said firmly. Lily reared back, as if surprised. Harry didn't falter. "I'll be better than you, Mum. I love you, but...I'm not going to be you. I'm not going to sacrifice myself to the altar of Healing. But, I'll be better anyway."

Lily looked at him for a long moment where she didn't say anything at all. And something shifted in her eyes as she looked at him. She reached across the desk and pressed her hand against cheek, sliding her hand up to bury her fingers in his hair and she took a deep, shuddering breath.

And Harry thought she might—just might—believe him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I lied. I needed to write a new chapter because the writing gods demanded it.

Here is the second to last chapter of Part One (though everything is included in this one fic, Diagnosis). This is a two-part story, with everything building up to breaking--the diagnosis, if you will. Part Two is all about treatment. Harry has partially addressed his problems--at least, with his mother. Next time, he'll finally, FINALLY talk to Tom--for real this time. Like wrap up that whole thing, and then, we can get to Harry healing and becoming a better person, friend, and Healer!

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Harry and Lily's confrontation. I hope that might address her character a bit more. It makes me sad to think people hate her because she's so complex, in her own right, and I think it's just hard for her to emotionally connect. But, she's going to try to be better. Promise!

LASTLY (Edited): Anyone telling me that Harry was alone for all of childhood is entitled to their opinion, but opinions can be wrong. He was raised by James. I don't know if that was clear. James was there and raised him and loved him, but also, worked a lot, and they didn't really get along too well, because Harry is fiercely independent and very different from James, which James doesn't know how to handle.

Lily was like...a workaholic. Who traveled a lot. But, like, was present for important shit. Like birthdays. So, Lavender and Harry weren't neglected. They just weren't always a priority which fucking sucks, but life happens like that sometimes.

AND I JUST ADDED A NEW TAG: Unreliable Narrator

Because Harry is an UNRELIABLE NARRATOR. Because he doesn't fucking know everything even though he'd like to believe he does, which is in character for a twenty-something.

EDIT:

Akestor - http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/77119526181/spell-name-cleansing-spell-incantation-akestor

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is unheard of.”

“This is brilliant,” Harry said calmly.

They stood side by side in the gallery, staring down into the magical theatre as Hermione and Vance prepared themselves for what would probably be one of their greatest accomplishments in their career. Harry looked at Hermione. She looked calm, her face totally still, but her hands were trembling. She clenched them into fists and took a deep breath.

“It is. It’s ingenious,” Lily said, her voice cool. She was so still that she was like a statue. Harry glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. She was still, but if he looked at her, really looked at her, he could see the worry and tension in her neck.

“She’s going to be fine, Mum,” Harry said quietly.

Lily hummed, rocking back and forth. “Okay. I wish it was me.”

“I wish it was me too,” Harry muttered.

Lily laughed quietly. "Neither of us would do a good job. It's not our specialty," Lily said. She glanced at Harry, slyly. "You wouldn't have the patience for it."

Harry snorted. “Fuck off. I’ve had a lot of patience. For you, especially.”

Lily sobered. Harry swallowed as he felt the playfulness slide away into something more somber.

“Thank you for being...patient with me,” Lily said quietly.

“You could’ve been angry with me. I talk a lot of shit about you,” Harry pointed out. He hesitated again. “A lot of shit.”

“I’m sure,” Lily murmured. “I’ve given you a lot of reason to...talk shit. I wasn’t there. A lot. I didn’t think that it would bother you, you know. That I wasn’t there. You had James and Sirius and Remus. I made sure...that you had a support system.”

Harry hummed.

"That's the funny thing. I guess I did have a support system. They were good to me. In their own way. But, I didn't care about pranks and Quidditch and shit like that. I wanted...I idolized you," Harry said, quietly. "I wanted to be just like you."

“Nobody should want to be just like me,” Lily said carefully.

“I was a kid. I didn’t know about that type of shit,” Harry retorted. “I looked for your validation. Your validation mattered to me.”

“I *am* proud of you," Lily sighed, looking back down as Hermione and Emmeline continued to prep, arranging the suture kits and the bundle of unicorn hair, next to the careful row of potion vials. "There was never a moment that I wasn't. And I'm not...great at showing emotion. I wasn't always, but I am now. That's...not easy to change."

“I get that,” Harry said quietly.

He wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Albus says I need therapy.”

Harry looked up sharply. “Excuse me?”

“I need therapy,” Lily repeated. “Albus Dumbledore says I need therapy. And you need therapy. Apparently, we all need therapy.”

“I don’t...disagree,” Harry said warily.

"He also says I shouldn't tell you something. The worst thing I've ever done. Worse than not being around. But, I'm going to tell you," Lily said as if gearing up for a fight. Her shoulders tensed and she took a deep breath, shaking out her hand. "I *have* to tell you because if I don’t...and you find out, we won’t be able to fix this. I’m going to tell you.”

She didn't sound so sure.

"Tell me then," Harry said, his voice suddenly hard.

"I'm sorry for a lot of things, Harry. I'm sorry that I wasn't around. I'm sorry that I thought that you wouldn't need me, when you did. I'm sorry that I can't articulate the emotion that you need to hear for me," Lily said, measuring each word carefully. And then, she turned to look at him with bright green eyes. "I asked him to reject you from this program and when he said no, I ran away. I'm sorry for that. I've never been sorrier for anything in my life."

Harry’s breath caught in his throat.

I’m sorry.

She’d never said that before.

“You need therapy,” Harry hissed softly.

Lily smiled sadly. “I do. And you’re not common. That was wrong of me to say,” Lily said quietly.

Harry took a deep breath, pushing down his aggression. He heard Hermione’s voice hissing in his ear: *Enough.*

“My anger is common. Everyone’s got something to be angry about. I take it out on people. That’s kinda fucked up. And you’re angry, and you keep it bottled up inside. Also, fucked up,” Harry muttered and Lily nodded in agreement. “I used to think you loved Lavender more. You were never as distant from her.”

“Lavender was easier. She’s like James. People that aren’t like us...are always easier,” Lily said.

“People that aren’t like us?” Harry asked.

Lily smirked. “People that can be satisfied. People like us...are never satisfied,” Lily said quietly. “I never told you that you were the best and that you had to be better because that’s what was told to me my entire life. I had to be the best. I had to be twice as good. Always. And, I never wanted that for you because it’s a lot of expectation on a kid. Too much. And then, I realized...you were like me, and you would form that expectation on your own. I realized that when you told me you were going to be a Healer.”

“How’d you know I’d be good?” Harry challenged.

Lily raised an eyebrow at him. "You think I don't know you, Harry? I know you. I know you like my bones. I know everything about you. I got all of your OWLs and NEWTs. Outstandings and Exceeding Expectations in everything but History of Magic and Divination. I heard about *every* one of your accomplishments. I have pictures of you and Lavender in my study. You don’t think Astoria and Draco knew who you were? They knew. Everyone knows. I adore you and your sister.”

Harry hesitated.

“Did you used to sing to us?” Harry asked quietly.

Lily froze, turning to look at him. “Yes,” she whispered. “I used to sing to you.”

“Why did you stop?” Harry asked.

“You asked me to.”

Harry twitched.

“When?” he demanded. “When did I ask you to stop?”

Lily looked back down at Lavender. “I went away. For a month. They needed me in Egypt for a case, and when I got back, you told me you didn’t need me to sing anymore for you and Lavender because you knew all the words and *you’d* taken care of her, just like you promised me. And I didn’t think…I thought you were just being independent. I didn’t think that it was because you thought I didn’t *want* you.”

“I don’t remember that,” Harry muttered. He looked up at her with suspicious eyes.

Lily smiled.

“I’ve done a lot of things, Harry, but I’ve never lied to you.”

That was true. Lily had never lied.

Harry went to respond, but Lily was smirking again.

“What?” Harry demanded. For some reason, his cheeks felt hot.

“Riddle?”

Harry squawked. “You can’t...what are you...I’m not...you can’t ask me about him! And you can’t ask him. Leave it alone, Mum.”

“He came to *me*,” Lily retorted. “Defended you good and proper. Basically told me to mind my business and that I was shit. Not wrong, but really, how *charming*.”

Harry snorted. “He’s got no right to talk to you about me.”

“Oh, I’ve heard all about that debacle. St. Mungo’s was always a *cesspool* of gossip,” Lily drawled. She rocked back and forth again. “He’s your type. Tall. Handsome. Ambitious.”

“What do you know about my type?” Harry retorted.

Lily sighed. “We’ve gone over this, Harry-love,” she said and Harry’s eyes widened.

“You haven’t called me that since I was a kid.”

“Am I still allowed to call you it? I won’t if you don’t want me to,” Lily said. She didn’t sound like it would bother her either way, but now, Harry knew her—they knew each other like their bones. It would bother the fuck out of her.

And Harry could be petty. He could be mean. But, he wouldn’t. He’d rise above.

“Sure,” Harry allowed.

He nearly gaped when Lily turned to him and *beamed*, wild and uncontrolled, before she pulled it back and looked impassive again.

“I know you, Harry-love. Theodore Nott?” Lily challenged.

Harry flushed. “Whatever,” he muttered.

“I never thought I’d see the day. Tom Riddle in love with something other than his own reflection,” Lily laughed to herself, shaking her head. She ignored Harry’s stiffening. “But, it’s not enough. Because he’s like us. Never satisfied.”

“He’s a lying asshole,” Harry hissed.

"You're a bit of an asshole yourself, Harry. You inherited that from your mother," Lily pointed out and Harry snorted. "Your assholery and your penchant for Firewhiskey."

"I stole your Firewhiskey. When I was sixteen. You were away again. Right after my birthday, that is. You went to...Indonesia, was it? So, you went away and I was upset because we fought right before about something dumb. Something stupid. I think I wanted to go party in Knockturn Alley. I screamed that you didn't have the right to parent me because you weren't there, and you told me that you were still my mum. So, I opened your twenty-year-old bottle of Firewhiskey and drank half and then dumped the rest out of my window just *to be an arse. I had the biggest hangover on the face of the planet. I thought I woul*d die."

Lily looked down at him. “That’s James-level bullshit.”

“Get off *your* bullshit,” Harry retorted.

“It’s hard when your bullshit is mountain high. You’ve only got a hill of bullshit,” Lily drawled. “Wait until *you’re* forty-something.”

“I’m not going to be like you. Emotionally stunted and shit,” Harry challenged.

Lily hummed. “No, you won’t. You’ve got people. Your person. Her,” Lily said softly, looking down at Hermione. “Hermione Granger.”

“Yes,” Harry whispered. “My person.”

“Severus used to be my person. Now, I’m my own person.”

“You should find a person. It’s good for you,” Harry said quietly.

Lily tilted her head as she looked down at the pair. “My person,” she whispered.

Hermione looked up at her person and his mother and trembled harder. Harry and Lily looked like they were having a civil conversation. Harry had even smiled at one point, so that was good.

That was all good and well and whatever-the-fuck, but Hermione was freaking out. She had white dragonskin gloves covering her palms and a needle in her right hand, with unicorn hair hanging off of it and she was freaking the fuck out.

“Granger,” Emmeline called and she sounded like she was down a tunnel.

Hermione looked down at Lavender’s body and a sharp inhale later, Vance’s hands were wrapped around her wrists, stopping her from shaking. Hermione looked up into Vance’s eyes. Vance looked back at her, calm and stern.

“Yes, Healer?” Hermione rasped.

"Listen to me, Hermione Granger. This...this right here. This is going to be the start of your career. You're going to be recognized for innovating a technique that will help make this world a better place. You have your place in medical history because of this," Vance said firmly.

Hermione nodded, slowly. “Okay.”

“Yes, okay. You need to understand something, Hermione,” Emmeline said. “You were *made* for this.”

Hermione froze.

You were made for this.

“I was made for this,” Hermione repeated.

“Yes.”

And Emmeline took a step back, looking around and she cleared her throat.

“Well, then. Let’s fuck some shit up and change the world?” Vance asked.

“Let’s change the fucking world,” Hermione agreed. She looked at Vance expectantly and Vance grinned. “What?”

“Hermione. I’m your teacher. Make the first stitch. Change the world,” Vance said, gesturing towards Lavender.

And Hermione stepped forward, wand in one hand and the needle in the other and she waved her wand once. The bandages dissolved, leaving open red wounds, flaps of skin there from the potions that they had smeared over Lavender’s body in preparation.

Hermione pressed the needle to the skin and began to sew, silver thread looping through Lavender’s skin, and Hermione Granger changed the world.

DIAGNOSIS

“This will be dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous, for sure,” Sirius agreed in a rushed whisper.

“We might die,” James muttered.

“We might.”

“If we fail, Lily is going to *murder* me,” James sighed, rocking back and forth in his little crouch at the edge of the clearing that Moody had laid in wait for months. He could hear them, growling and laughing and feasting by the fire. Even though it was a half-moon, they were still so utterly wolfish—Fenrir Greyback and his inner circle, Scabior and his Snatchers.

“Remus will murder me,” Sirius agreed. He paused. “But, for Moody. For the victims of the Diagon Alley attack. For Jimmy Peakes. For Lavender.”

For the ones that had died, for the maimed ones, for the traumatized, and for his daughter.

These people had been right to be angry, James thought. And he could almost understand them. Dolores Umbridge was a foul woman, constantly pushing her anti-werewolf agenda. It was gaining some traction in the Minister for Magic's office and with the Wizengamot. They were protesting it. They felt ignored and attacked, and James *understood* that. He understood how he might have failed some. How he and Sirius both might have failed.

They were visible, James even more so as Head Auror. Sirius' partner was a werewolf. They were both well-known, and still, they hadn't spoken out against it. They had gone the route they always had—politics weren't for them, even though James *knew* that as Head Auror, he would have to change it.

They had gotten personal—attacking James' daughter because he was visible. And James hadn't stepped up to defend them, so they thought it appropriate to torment him to attack him and get personal as he hadn't with them.

Still, if they wanted a fight, James would give it to them.

He moved quick and fast, his wand flashing out. "*Stupefy*."

One Snatcher toppled over, his leg kicking at the bonfire and sparks flew as the fire collapsed on itself, sending fire spiraling outward. Greyback and Scabior jumped up, turning and sneering, searching for the attackers.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" Scabior shrieked, green light erupting.

James and Sirius exchanged glances. "Permission to use deadly force?" Sirius hissed.

And James wanted to say yes. He *wanted* to. Scabior and his Snatchers were complicit, at the very least, and active murders, at the most. But, only Greyback had definitely killed or hurt anyone, according to Moody's intel. Only Greyback ripped apart a poor kid. Only Greyback tried to destroy his *child*.

"Greyback *only*," James allowed.

Sirius smirked. He dashed out of the trees, James at his back, and it was a full duel from there.

For James, it was as easy as breathing. Duelling had always been where he had shined. The magic never erupted—that was never conducive to a good duel. No, the magic was just on the edge of boiling inside of him, always warm, always careful, and always ready. It rolled with every twist and twitch of his wrist, and erupted in fire and ice and bolts of purple lightning and red sparks and bangs of white light.

He could barely feel the impact of spells. He staggered when a Cutting Curse hit the meat of his thigh, but he didn't falter with his own hex, downing another Snatcher. He flinched when he felt his leg crack and snap in two places, his mind going hazy with the pain before he snapped at himself, pushing through with adrenaline. He wondered if this was what Lily and

Harry felt when they Healed. Did they feel the same rush he felt as he broke people? Did they feel the same rush as they mended broken things?

Sirius was embroiled in a duel with Scabior, already favoring his right leg. Probably a twisted ankle. James wouldn't worry too seriously about him. Instead, he focused his attention on Greyback, never losing sight of him.

“Greyback,” James taunted. “Never heard of civil disobedience? Protest with a fucking permit like a normal fucking person?”

Greyback bared his teeth, wet with blood and James sneered.

“Your daughter was *delicious*, Potter. Her blood was sweet. I licked her blood from my claws. I thought about biting her. But, no...she didn't deserve the *gift*. If she survived...I would’ve come back for her, though. She was such a sweet thing. Telling me to fuck off,” Greyback snarled and spat, creeping forward like a dog. “Should’ve fucked *her*. Telling me to fuck off.”

James couldn’t help himself. He grinned, cruel and terrible.

He could imagine her. *Go fuck yourself,* he could imagine her saying.

Good girl, Lavender.

James ducked when Greyback took a swipe at his head, his unnaturally long nails curling forward to resemble his terrible claws. He heard Sirius let out a guttural shout, but James kept his head level. He engaged. He ducked and weaved, shooting curse after spell. Greyback dodged them all, fast and terrible and this was the man that had tried to *murder* his daughter.

“Won’t you read me my rights, Potter? Arrest me?” Greyback challenged.

James sneered and didn’t bother responding, shooting out a Cutting Curse. The spell connected and Greyback roared with fury and agony as the curse drew from his left hip, up and across his body, blood exploding and spattering over James’ face. Somehow, Greyback twisted to look even more wolf-like, almost as if he were on the brink of transforming.

So, *that* wasn’t a rumor.

How fucking lovely.

Greyback roared, gnashing his fangs as he leaped forward, his teeth snapping around air as he went for James' shoulder. James didn't move fast enough, Greyback's claw-like hand snapping around his left hand and twisting. James grunted and blasted Greyback back in a flash of white light. His wrist twinged painfully, but at least, it wasn't his wand hand."How are you holding up, Sirius?" James called, not taking his eyes off of Greyback as the wolf licked his wounds, growling in the back of his throat.

“A-almost wrapped up. Y-you know I’ve taken out nearly twice as many as you,” Sirius shouted, and he sounded unsteady. James cursed his breath.

Time to wrap things up.

“Greyback is worth 10 points,” James barked, laughing meanly.

“You’re on!” Sirius called.

And James didn’t hesitate a second longer. He ran towards Greyback, surprising the man, and he ignored the way the wolf went for his leg, both hands wrapping tight around it, claws digging through his trousers and flesh. James heard a faint snap, but mostly he heard his own blood pounding in his ears and Lavender and Harry.

Go fuck yourself.

Greyback reared his head back, preparing to press his fangs into James’ thigh.

What did you do, James?

“*Avada Kedavra,*” James said, coldly and he was momentarily blinded by a flash of green light before Greyback fell limp.

There was a moment of heat that overwhelmed James and he felt lightheaded for just a moment before everything snapped back into place, and he staggered. He looked around and Sirius was watching him, his hand clasped over his right shoulder, blood nearly black against his skin in the dimming firelight.

“S-Summon the mediwizards,” James stammered, his eyes rolling around his head as he gasped. “If you can.”

Pain always came slowly, creeping forward. It started at the tip of his toes.

Sirius keened in the back of his throat and despite his gushing shoulder, lifted his wand, shooting alarming black and red sparks into the air. And then, he collapsed, falling in a heap of himself, blood splattering over his neck and chin.

The last thing James thought he heard was a loud crack, and his vision began to swim. He thought he saw—if he was lucky, he wasn’t imagining it—the long black beak of a plague doctor’s mask. And then, everything went black for him

Bellatrix Black hissed as she looked around at the utter carnage. She looked over at Fenrir Greyback’s broken body, his blood a puddle beneath his lifeless body. The Snatchers were decimated, all bleeding and groaning in their own agony, unable to even twitch to save themselves.

“Holy shit, Potter,” Rodolphus breathed to himself. Ron blinked madly, looking over at Bellatrix, waiting for her orders.

Bellatrix shook her head. “Summon the Aurors.”

DIAGNOSIS

"Hermione!" Neville called, waving Hermione over as she looked around the cafeteria as if she were ready to bolt at any moment. She relaxed when she saw Neville sitting with Abbott, Smith, and Patil, and walked over with a giddy smile on her face.

Smith looked at her, grudgingly impressed. “Heard you helped heal Lily Evans’ daughter?”

"Not only helped heal but came up with a new *treatment.* Congratulations,” Patil said with a tiny smile. Smith scoffed, shaking his head, practically vibrating with his jealousy.

“It could’ve been anyone. Why you?” Smith demanded.

“Harry asked for me,” Hermione said with a smirk. She turned to Neville, and there was something hesitant in her eyes now. Neville’s eyebrows rose as he waited for her to speak. “Where...where’s Ron?”

“He’s on Bellatrix’s service. They’re out in the field,” Neville said. He leaned back in his chair as Hermione began to greedily devour her food. She looked a right mess, unwashed and greasy and there might still be little dots of blood that had been completely washed away from her chin, but she looked happier than Neville had ever seen her.

She looked up, a chip hanging out of her mouth. “What?” she demanded.

Neville’s nose crinkled as she talked with her mouth full.

“How was it?” Hannah blurted out.

Hermione swallowed her food and smiled. “It was...it was the best thing I’ve ever experienced in my life. It was...I felt like a *Healer*. Like a real Healer,” Hermione whispered like a secret and she shook her head, her lips curling into a wider grin.

“She really won’t scar?” Patil asked, ever the skeptic.

“We don’t expect it to scar like it would’ve if we had just cauterized and sealed it with silver. Unicorn hair is known for its restorative powers and it combats Dark magic. But, we’ll see how it goes,” Hermione said patiently.

Hannah tapped her hands on the table. “What’s Lily Evans like?”

Hermione hesitated. "I don't...I don't know yet. She watched. She and Harry watched."

“You performed with Lily *Evans* watching you?” Smith asked in disbelief. Something like respect crossed his face. “Damn, Granger.”

And Hermione smiled to herself, looking down at her plate, already half-devoured. She was gross and sweaty and so tired that she could fall over, yet she didn’t want to fall asleep. She was so buzzed, on a high. She had done a procedure. Vance had let her stitch Lavender

closed, gently guiding her. They had worked together, like a team, and whenever Hermione was stuck, Vance hadn't given her the answer. She had stared at Hermione and waited.

She believed that Hermione knew the answer and she had. Vance, despite their differences, had trusted her instincts.

Instincts.

Hermione had never felt instinctual about anything concerning Healing. She had done the readings, all of the research, and had applied it as necessary. But, that went out the window with Creature-Induced Injuries. She had had gut feelings, had been overwhelmed by the difference she was making.

Was this what addiction felt like?

DIAGNOSIS

Albus beamed at the tired young Healer that stood in front of his desk. She looked like she had recently showered, her hair still damp and making wet damp spots on the bright lime green robes that she had put on. She was bare-faced for once, without her obligatory red lips or heavy eyeliner. She looked far more resigned than she should.

"Congratulations, Emmeline. You have achieved so much in such a short time, and I commend you," Albus said with a bright smile.

Emmeline nodded, blinking sleepily. "T-thank you, Head Healer," she said as she yawned, her eyes squinting shut. She cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

"No matter, my girl. You've done well for yourself. And I'm sure you're exhausted. I only asked for you to commend you. You'll be on the cover of every medical journal this quarter," Albus said, excited and Emmeline leaned forward, seeming a little more awake.

"I-I'm sorry?" she stammered.

"You and your trainee devised a new way of treatment for Dark magic curse marks. After you write your paper, of *course*, you'll be on every medical journal. The world will be your *oyster,* Emmeline," Albus said.

He stared at her with a tiny smile. She looked bewildered and she ran a shaky hand through her wet hair.

"I...I can't believe…" and she looked down. "I didn't come here for all of that."

Albus frowned. "What is it, Emmeline?"

“I came...to ask for a sabbatical in France,” Emmeline whispered. “That worked well enough for Healer Evans, right? And she’s...well, I imagine she’ll be here for some time. Someone must continue her work in developing a Healing education program there, right?”

Albus’ eyes widened in confusion and he shook his head, staring at her.

“Where is this coming from, Emmeline?” he asked curiously.

And Emmeline bit her bottom lip hard, struggling with her words. She was wringing her hands and gave a tired smile.

“Please, just think about it, sir. I’m going to...finish the paperwork and go home,” Emmeline said instead of answering his question. She looked away with a wry smile. “I could use the sabbatical to work on the paper. Just an incentive. Just...think about it, won’t you, Healer Dumbledore?”

Albus nodded sadly and he watched her leave.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry felt him sit down next to him rather than saw him. Tom’s arm stretched out across the back of the bench, casually, his fingers brushing against Harry’s wild hair. Despite himself, Harry relaxed back against him and let out a soft sigh.

“How are you?” Tom murmured.

“I’m just exhausted,” Harry said quietly. “My mother is exhausting. What’s happening to my sister. And you. Hating you is the most exhausting.”

Tom closed his eyes and brushed his fingers against the back of Harry’s neck again. Harry leaned back into the touch, drawing comfort from it, and slowly he turned his head. Tom’s breath caught in his throat like every time he looked into Harry’s eyes.

“I don’t want to do it anymore,” Harry whispered.

“Don’t want to do what?” Tom asked.

“I don’t want to hurt anymore. I’m so, so exhausted,” Harry confessed. He leaned into Tom’s touch, leaning against his side. “I’m tired of waiting for anyone’s validation but my own. I’m tired of being angry and sad all of the time.”

“What are you going to do about it, then, sweetheart?” Tom asked carefully.

Harry smiled.

“You love me, Tom Riddle. I know you do,” Harry said, staring at him with those beautiful green eyes. “But, not enough. And I deserve more than what you’re willing to give.”

Tom committed the man to memory. This beautiful man, full of scars and ambition. Brimming with talent. He had been intoxicated by his wit and sharp tongue when they had

first met. And then, as he had gotten to know Harry Potter, in all his glory, he had been intrigued by his bitterness, mirroring his own. His rudeness.

“You’re fucked up,” Tom whispered.

Harry’s lips tilted into a terribly sad smile. “You’re fucked up. I don’t think we can be fucked up together. Happy birthday, Tom.”

And he leaned up, pressing a chaste kiss to Tom’s lips. He pulled out Tom’s arms and walked away, not looking back.

When Bellatrix had run, Tom had been full of rage. Ego bruised and trust broken.

He didn’t feel that now. Now, he only felt lost.

DIAGNOSIS

“Summon the Aurors, Weasley,” Bellatrix repeated.

“H-how?” Ron stammered.

Rodolphus rolled his eyes. “As thus. *Expecto Patronum*,” he cast. A silvery wolf lept from the end of his wand, looking alert as ever. “*Dissero Patronae*. Centurion down. All enemies eliminated or incapacitated. Send back-up and clean-up.”

The wolf disappeared in a flash of light and Bellatrix huffed.

“What was that?” Ron asked as Bellatrix pressed her plague doctor mask to her face, rolling up her black sleeves as she knelt between James and Sirius’ body.

"It was the Patronus Charm and the Talking Patronus Charm. It's how we communicate. Mediwizards are usually the first on the scene, even before back-up. There are code names for specific figures in government. Potter is Centurion," Bellatrix explained. She looked up through her mask with suspicious black eyes. "Let's see if you're as talented as your little friend, Ronald Weasley. Cast the diagnostics charm on Potter."

Ron nodded, pushing away his mild confusion. It was easier when he had clear instructions. He would treat this like chess. There were strategies to this. It was his job to make sure that they made it back to St. Mungo’s stable and alive. That was the game. He was the knight.

He cast the diagnostics charm and didn’t flinch as the information washed over him. He looked over at Bellatrix, who waited for him, already twitching impatiently.

“Sprained wrist. Serious laceration to the thigh. Broken leg. Superficial cuts and scrapes. Magical exhaustion,” Ron listed out, clipped and hurried.

Bellatrix nodded. She even relaxed some, to Ron's surprise. She seemed less tense, rolling back her shoulders as he scooted forward in the dirt.

"Good. All align with what I'd hoped to see," Bellatrix said.

"What you'd hoped?" Ron asked.

Rodolphus hummed, nodding. "Nothing out of the ordinary. He won't need to be checked into any special wards or need further treatment after we finish up with him and he goes through recovery. Black's got a sprained ankle and a Cutting Curse to the shoulder that nicked the axillary artery. But, nothing that requires Spell Damage."

Ron jumped when there was a sudden loud crack and he looked behind him. Aurors were appearing in their dark navy robes. There was two that really caught Ron's attention—a young woman with vibrant pink hair and a tall black man with a shiny bald head and single gold hoop earring.

"Mediwizard Black?" the black man said in a deep voice.

"Here! With a trainee and Rodolphus Lestrange. We've got it. You take care of your prisoners or whatever," Bellatrix snarled. Her mouth twisted under her plague doctor mask. "Fucking micromanagers."

Ron still hadn't torn his gaze away from the Aurors as they worked methodically on the crime scene. "What are they—" he began.

"You're a Healer, not an Auror. Come closer, Weasley. You're here to learn," Bellatrix snarled under his breath. Ron did as he was instructed scooting closer and leaning forward. "Give me some light."

"*Lumos,"* Ron breathed, and the tip of his wand exploding in white. Bellatrix squinted for just a moment before she adjusted.

"Fuck Potter and his stupidity. If he had called for *back-up.* Fucking stupid taking on a terrorist cell with my idiot cousin," Bellatrix hissed under her breath.

Ron raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. Instead, he glanced back at

If he'd been hit with a curse, we'd only stabilize him and get him to Spell Damage, immediately," Rodolphus said. He looked over at Bellatrix slyly. "We both know why you don't want to go to Spell Damage?"

"Why the fuck are you even here?" Bellatrix snarled as she made quick work of James Potter's stupidity and his sprained wrist. The man was nearly unconscious from the pain, wavering between darkness and the light as she splinted his wrist and moved to work on his leg.

Rodolphus barely looked up from the bandages that he was applying to Sirius Black's legs. The man cursed under his breath as Bellatrix's cousin lost control *again*, shifting from his

Animagus form back to his human form. Rodolphus growled, fed up finally and he lifted his wand.

“Because this is my *job*? *Akinisía,*” Rodolphus retorted as he put Sirius in stasis and leaned back. He glanced over at Ron. “You. Weasley, do you know how to bandage a wound?”

“Uh yeah,” Ron squeaked.

“Good. Do it. Or your friend’s godfather bleeds out. Go,” Rodolphus commanded. “An artery was nicked. Apply the bandage. Give him this.”

Ron lept into action, pulling out his wand as he wracked his brain for the spell. “*Anadeîn*,” he cast and he watched as the white cloth plastered itself over the wound. He fumbled with the vial that Rodolphus had passed him, looking up, unsure.

“Pinch his nose, lift his head, and poured it down his throat so he doesn’t choke on it. It’s Blood-Replenishing Potion,” Bellatrix said without even looking up as she began to bind James’ broken leg, already having finished with the gash on his thigh. She tutted under her breath. “Potter’s leg is shattered in two places. Fuck.”

Ron did as Bellatrix commanded, lifting Sirius’ head in his lap, pinched his nose and dumped the potion down his throat.

“Good man,” Rodolphus said, thumping Ron on the shoulder. He looked around at the carnage and huffed under his breath as Aurors rushed to clean everything up, not paying them any mind. It was good that they were out of the way.

“Why did you even come back, Rodolphus? Nobody wants you here,” Bellatrix snapped. She continued under her breath, “Least of all me.”

“Why? Because you think you can win Tom back? Don’t waste your time, Bella,” Rodolphus taunted. Bellatrix stiffened, bending her head even farther forward as she straightened out James’ leg, wrapping it carefully and stabilizing it with magic. “From what I hear he’s found a new little hottie. Evans’ kid? I think I saw him. He looks...wild.”

“That’s my friend you’re talking about,” Ron snapped, irritated. Both Rodolphus and Bellatrix looked at him, surprised to still see him working. He had already put Sirius on a floating gurney, waiting for transport. “Can you do this little fight later, after we have both patients at St. Mungo’s?”

“Watch yourself, Weasley,” Bellatrix snapped, her cheeks blotchy with embarrassment. She waved her wand, conjuring a floating gurney and then pointed her wand at James. Slowly, she Levitated him onto the gurney and let out a sigh.

“Where do we transfer them, Mediwizard Black?” Ron asked gruffly.

“Ground Floor, E&T for now. We’ll transfer them to recovery if they go twelve hours without any complications,” Rodolphus said, straightening. Ron’s eyes narrowed.

“Didn’t ask you. I’m on Mediwizard Black’s service,” Ron said stiffly.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. “Let’s go, Weasley.”

They Disapparated with a crack.

DIAGNOSIS

Lavender blinked herself awake.

The room was still violently white, painstakingly clean in a way that Lavender usually cringed from. But, the pain wasn’t as striking. Now, it was a dull throb, soothed by a cool balm that felt so powerful that her head went hazy with the amount of magic. Lavender let out a soft sigh.

“Lav? Lavender, are you awake?”

Lavender opened her mouth, as her vision swam. That voice. That voice belonged to Harry. Her Harry. Her stupid bro-bro.

“Ouch,” she hissed.

“She says ‘ouch’. She’s a medical marvel and she says ouch.”

A laugh. A familiar laugh.

“*Mum*?” Lavender asked as everything came into sharp focus. She groaned, reaching a shaky hand up to her throat. Her throat felt sore—on fire, really—as if she had a really terrible bout of the flu.

Slowly, Lavender turned her head. Harry and Mum sat next to her, elation in their eyes. Mum looked different—shorter hair—and there was...the tension that she usually carried in every muscle of her body seemed to be gone. She looked relieved and she was *smiling*. Harry was beautiful as ever, beaming down at her with so much affection, Lavender felt like her heart could burst.

“We’re here, sis. We’re here,” Harry grinned.

Mum reached forward, brushing Lavender’s hair from her face.

“You’re so brave, Lavender. So very brave,” Mum whispered, trembling and then she let out a wretched sound that made both Harry and Lavender jump.

Harry looked at her, alarmed as that wretched sound escaped Mum’s mouth again. Mum’s head dropped to the bedside and she trembled, her sobs like a dying animal. Harry gaped down at her, blinking madly and then he looked at Lavender, unsure.

“Oh fuck, I thought you were going to die. I thought...I thought...fuck, *fuck*,” Mum gasped between her sobs and she reached up without looking up, her hands knotting in Harry’s sleeve. “I thought you were going to *die.*”

“I’m not dead, Mum,” Lavender said quietly.

Mum looked up, her eyes fierce. “No, you aren’t. You *aren’t*. You’re going to be okay. You’re going to be okay. We’re going to be okay. Right, Lavender? Right, Harry-love?”

Harry swallowed. “Yeah. We’re going to be okay.”

Lavender snorted.

“What the fuck have I woken up to?”

“Watch your language,” Mum snapped immediately. She sagged forward, rubbing her hands over her face and then she shook her head. “I’m a shit mother, and I’m sorry about that, Lavender. I’ve been more shit to Harry, but I wasn’t there for you sometimes, either. So, I’m sorry. But, I’m going to do better. Because I can’t...fuck if you’d died...I would’ve *died*. I love you so much. I am...I love you so much. I hope you know that.”

“I love you too, Mum. I’ve always known that you love me,” Lavender said, frowning. She looked back at Harry again but he still looked bewildered. “What...how did...how did they fix me?”

And Harry slowly smiled, sweet and unsure. “My person. Well, she…she sewed you back together.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione took a deep breath and cursed under her breath.

Emmeline was missing. She had simply given her the chart and told her to finish it up. But, Hermione still *vibrated* with excitement. She took a deep breath as she pushed the door open, a bright smile on her face as she sauntered in. Lily Evans looked up, immediately, a serenity on her face that could only be a parent’s relief.

Harry looked up and Lavender looked over, her arms and cheek and throat glinting with the silver of unicorn hair.

“Welcome back, Lavender,” Hermione greeted.

Lavender grinned, tugging awkwardly at the stitches on her face. “It’s good to be back,” she said. “I’m sorry we couldn’t meet under better circumstances.”

“As am I,” Hermione returned honestly. She walked up to Harry and leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to his forehead. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered back, nuzzling her cheek.

Hermione pulled back and looked down at Lavender. “Well, from what I can see, your wounds are going to heal up really nicely. You might scar. This was the first time performing this procedure, but if you *do* scar, it’s going to be minimal. Very, very minimal,” Hermione began. She flipped through her notes. “Are you feeling hungry?”

“Not yet, but I think I’ll be starving soon enough,” Lavender said honestly.

Hermione nodded. "Well, we're going to get you started on soft foods in a day or so, and then, you'll be out in a week. Then, we can figure out your PT schedule. Is there anyone, in particular, you want to do that with?"

“You, maybe?” Lavender asked.

Hermione blinked, momentarily surprised, before a small smile crossed her face. "I'm only a trainee, but I can make a list of people I'd recommend."

“Sure,” Lavender said.

“Dumbledore will be doing your other therapy. Is that okay?” Harry asked.

Lavender nodded. “Sure,” she said and she leaned forward, interested. “So...what exactly did you do to me?”

“We sewed your wounds closed. And your organs,” Hermione said calmly.

Lavender’s eyes widened. “*How*?”

“Unicorn hair,” Hermione said.

“You’re brilliant,” Harry said in awe as he looked up at her.

Hermione smirked. “I *know*,” she laughed jokingly. Then she hesitated again. “Are you coming home tonight?”

Harry suddenly looked hesitant as he looked at Lavender and then at Lily.

“Go home, Harry,” Lily said quietly.

“What if she needs me?” Harry asked. “Dad is in the hospital too.”

“What?” Lavender demanded, squawked.

Harry snorted. “Dad is a fucking idiot, as always. But...he got your attacker. Fenrir Greyback. He’s dead.”

Lavender sneered but said nothing.

“I’m going to be here, Harry,” Lily said, looking at the wall.

Harry frowned. “You have work in France.”

“Hmmm,” Lily hummed. “I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something else but seemed to think better of it. Then, he turned to Hermione.

“Yeah, I’m coming home. I’ll go home with you, yeah?” Harry asked.

Hermione smiled. “Okay,” she said. She turned back to Lavender. “I’m glad you’re doing well, Lavender. I’ll be in to check your progress in the morning.”

“Hermione.”

Hermione froze when she heard Lily call her name. She turned to look at her, and glanced at Harry. Harry was smiling at her, softly, at ease, and Hermione tried to relax when she was trapped in Lily's spiraling green eyes. They were different from Harry's eyes, though the same color. Lily's eyes were chilly and pointed.

“Yes, Healer?” Hermione asked, softly.

“You were amazing. Thank you for what you’ve done,” Lily said, firmly.

“Really?” Hermione whispered.

Lily nodded once. “What you did...was ingenious and resourceful and saved my daughter from unnecessary pain. Thank you,” Lily repeated.

“You’re...you’re welcome. Emmeline is...brilliant,” Hermione breathed, unable to help herself. She couldn’t stop herself from gushing. She trembled with her excitement. “I...I sewed you back together, Lavender. Your aortic tissue was...nearly destroyed. Your lungs punctured, and tears in your stomach. But, I held them in my hand and *mended* them. Wait. Sorry. Inappropriate.”

Lavender rolled her eyes. “My mother is Lily Evans. My brother is Harry Potter. You think I haven’t heard people gushing about Healing before?”

“Mum doesn’t gush,” Harry pointed out.

Lily’s eyes narrowed and Lavender just grinned.

"Anyway, I was holding you together with my bare hands, bringing you together," Hermione gasped and she bounced up and down. She could barely hold herself together, jittery with excitement. "And I got stuck sometimes. Unsure. But, Emmeline just looked at me and said: You know what to do. I felt *alive* for the first time in, I don’t know how long. It was like...like I had *air* in my lungs and—”

“She’s leaving.”

Hermione stopped, looking at Lily with wide eyes. Harry frowned.

“What?” Harry asked.

"I'm staying. Permanently," Lily said. She sighed. "Lavender has to go to physical therapy and regular therapy, and *we* have things to work through, Harry, so I’m staying. But, that means that Emmeline is going. To finish my work.”

Hermione trembled, shaking her head. "No," she hissed. "No. I can't let her leave."

Harry reached his hand out to her, frowning in concern.

She took a step back, shaking her head and then turned on her heel, running down the Children Ward, bolting right into the stairwell. She nearly collided with two matrons, clearly leaving for the day, but she didn’t stop to apologize. Instead, Hermione nearly vaulted down the steps, two stairs at a time as she rushed forward. She crashed into the Creature-Induced Injuries floor, gunning straight for Emmeline’s office.

Hermione threw the door open. She cursed when she found it empty, and then she turned, not even bothering to close the door. Instead, she took the stairs again, running straight for the lobby.

“Granger, where—” Smith began.

Hermione unapologetically shoved him out of the way, jumping the last five steps and feeling a pain radiating up from her shins. She didn’t stop.

Hermione ran harder than she ever had before, stumbling over her own feet. She saw Vance’s back and she felt her words escape.

“Healer Vance!” Hermione shouted. “Wait, wait. What do you want? More money? I’ll talk to Healer Dumbledore. I will. Harry...Harry Potter is my best friend. Lily Evans will do anything for him. She’ll put in a good word.”

Vance turned around, her eyes wide. She looked shockingly bare-faced without her red lipstick, and so utterly exhausted.

“No,” Vance said, shaking her head.

"You know, they can revamp the Creature-Induced Injuries unit. R-research money. You can work with Spectres and vampires and anything you want," Hermione begged and she reached forward, grabbing onto Vance's hands, trembling, mad and wild.

“It isn’t about that,” Vance whispered.

“Wait, wait, wait. No one’s ever believed in me like this. You believe in me more than I do. And I need that. I’m going to *die* here without that," Hermione begged, half-sobbing, her eyes blinded with passion and tears and Vance looked terrified of what she wanted to say.

Hermione was terrified of what she was saying but, she knew that every word, every breath was true. She wouldn't be able to survive. Not when she had reached inside of a girl and mended her soft bits. Not when she had held a beating heart in her hand and felt it grow stronger. Not when they had just made a girl's *scars* disappear. *Cursed* scars. She had done that.

Not when she finally—finally—understood what Harry had told her about Healing. When she understood what it was like to feel...*infinite*.

“Hermione, it’s more complicated than—”

“Tell me what you want and I will make it happen,” Hermione swore.

“I want Ron!” Vance shouted.

Hermione threw up her hands. “Fine! Done! Take him!”

She gasped, flinching backward. Her arms wrapped around her middle as Vance took a step back, just as terrified of Hermione’s words as Hermione was.

Hermione had always wanted to change the world. And the woman in front of her had helped make that happen. Hermione had wanted to be a Healer, and the first day, when she had been on those hunter green robes, she had felt like she was playing dress-up. But, when she had stepped in that theatre, she was no longer playing dress-up.

Those green robes were her own.

And Hermione hadn’t noticed. She hadn’t noticed the moment that being a Healer had changed her.

Hermione trembled. “Please...stay. I need you,” she said, her voice cracking.

And when Vance found her voice, she whispered, “*Okay.*”

Chapter End Notes

End Part One.

Okay, seriously, I'm not going to update Diagnosis for a hot second. I have to focus on Grymmr, which deserves my attention and love since I haven't updated that in a while. I have that one literally outlined until the very end so I'm going to work on that, and maybe a little of Showmen.

Let me know your thoughts. I know it ended on a very non-Harry part, but I don't regret that. This is where everything changes.

Also, don't worry too much about Harry and Tom. I intend for this to have a happy ending.

EDIT (Citations):

Anadeîn - http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/87340622952/spell-name-bandaging-spell-incantation-anade%C3%AEn

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lily tilted her head, listening at the door as Harry's sweet and scratchy voice carried through the doorway. Lavender was awake and had demanded that he sing for her again. Lavender liked it when Harry sang. Lily liked it too. She remembered standing in the doorway as Harry sang Lavender to bed with all of the songs that Lily used to sing.

It was always Muggle songs.

Over the Rainbow or *Here Comes the Sun.* Harry's favorite had always been *Summertime* or *Ball & Chain* or really anything by Janis Joplin. Lily remembered him stealing her old records and playing them in his room, the music floating out of his room through the window or filtering out from under the door.

But, Lavender's favorite.

"*Listen to the wind blow, watch the sun rise.*

Running in the shadows, damn your love, damn your lies."

Lily grinned. In this, Lavender and she were similar—they were both Fleetwood Mac fans.

"*And if you don't love now*

You will never love me again.

I can still hear you saying you would never break the chain—"

"Never break the chain!" Lavender shrieked, erupting in laughter.

Lily allowed a smile as she heard Harry's cackling. She could imagine his whole body trembling with his laughter. Whenever Lavender and Harry were together they reverted to wriggly little children again.

"Is that our boy?"

Lily turned to look at James, her lips pursed in disapproval as she looked James over. He was heavily favoring his unbroken leg, his hand tight around the top of his cane. He was trying to hide his limp, but James had never been able to hide anything from her.

"Yeah. Both of our children," Lily said patiently. She looked down at his leg, his wrapped wrist. "How are you?"

"Fine. Just like I was fine yesterday, Lils," James sighed, sounding exhausted.

Lily snorted. “You’re an idiot.”

“I know,” James muttered. “But, I got him, didn’t I? I got them all.”

“You did,” Lily allowed. “You kept our children safe, in the end. That’s all that matters. Except, I almost lost my entire family in one night and I’m terrified of it happening again.”

James looked at her, alarmed. He glanced down the hallway. They were alone. So, that was why Lily was feeling so expressive in a place that wasn’t the privacy of their bedroom or her study. James pressed his hand against her cheek, rubbing his thumb over her cheekbone.

“What’s got you so worked up, Lils?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” Lily murmured. “Lavender is being discharged today. And I can’t...I’m not going back to France.”

James’ eyes widened.

“What do you mean?” he asked, quietly.

“I mean I’m not going back to France. We have to make...changes. *I* have to make changes. Lavender almost died. Harry was so angry and I didn’t know. I’m going to take care of Lavender. And I want to be...friends with my son,” Lily admitted gently.

James’ lips twitched into a smile. “I think he’d like that too. You think you two will be okay?”

“I think we’ll get there,” Lily sighed and leaned forward. She barely needed to tilt her head to press her lips to James’. She liked how they were both about the same height, nearly 178 centimeters tall. She couldn’t imagine how Harry had ended up shorter than them both—though not by much, she acknowledged. “Tell Lavender we’re getting ready to go. I need to speak with Albus.”

“Of course, love,” James said with a tiny smile.

Lily didn’t spare another glance backward as she walked down the hall and into the general population of St. Mungo’s. She was immune to the awe-inspired stares of Healers, trainees, and matrons alike. She had always been stared at—too tall, red hair, talented, Muggleborn, woman, *Mudblood*. Lily’s nose twitched as she thought about that word, spat at her like the vitriol it was.

Mudblood.

Lily pushed away poison and pressed the lift button again.

“Healer Evans.”

Lily looked next to her. Bellatrix Black was staring straight ahead, patient.

"I think...that we are at a point where first name basis may be more appropriate," Lily said, measuring her words out carefully. Bellatrix nodded once in acknowledgment of her words and leaned forward, pressing the button again. "You've saved my daughter and my husband in one week. Thank you."

“You’re welcome,” Bellatrix said roughly.

“You’re an impressive woman, Bellatrix Black,” Lily said, following Bellatrix into the lift. Bellatrix rolled her eyes, humming to herself.

“How so?”

“You’re still here. Your past caught up with you. Your ex-fiance’s future is my son. And you’re still here. I admire you,” Lily said, honestly.

Bellatrix stiffened. “Lily, let’s not talk about my personal life.”

“You were so adamant about doing so and taunting my son when you didn’t think I knew,” Lily said with a smile. It was pointed and dangerous. “Don’t make my son’s life difficult for him. I’ve done that enough for him.”

She said nothing else, smiling pleasantly until the lift opened on her floor. Lily stepped out with a final nod before she walked down the Mind Ward floor, in search of her mentor. She was pleased to find that he was in his office, penning another letter.

“Albus,” she said as a greeting.

“Ah, Lily, my girl. I’m only penning *another* letter about your daughter’s Healers,” Albus said good-naturedly. Lily nodded with a tiny smile.

“What is it now?” she asked.

“They’re asking that we send Emmeline Vance and her *darling* student off to a pro-werewolf rally. They’re in high demand, aren’t they?” Albus asked.

Lily nodded. “Even more so once the paper is published,” she admitted. “It’ll be in the Healing syllabus at Hogwarts for sure.”

“Ah, well. What can I do for you?” Albus asked, pushing his letter away to give her his whole attention. Lily took a hesitant step forward. Albus looked at her, a knowing glint in his blue eyes. He always knew, wherever she was concerned.

“I’m not asking for my job back. I know that you don’t have the budget for it,” Lily began.

“We would find money for *you*, Lily—” Albus interrupted.

Lily shook her head. “No. I’m not here to ask for my job yet. I don’t want to step on any toes,” she said and they both knew *whose* toes she didn’t want to tread on. “I’m just letting you know that I’ll be around, dealing with Lavender’s physical therapy. But, I don’t want my students to stop learning. I’d like to integrate Draco and Astoria into St. Mungo’s program.”

Albus' eyes widened. So, he hadn't been expecting that, then. It was nice to know she could still surprise her old mentor.

"I'm not sure we have the space for that. And after having *you* as a teacher, I fear only Tom Riddle could compare," Albus said apologetically.

Lily's face twisted at the mention of Riddle. "I think Riddle is already too involved with a trainee to take on two more."

"Ah...you heard," Albus said delicately.

"And you *knew*," Lily accused. "You didn't tell me?"

"I was notified that it was none of my business, and I'm not afraid to admit that Tom was quite right. Harry is an adult," Albus reminded her.

Lily sniffed. "And Riddle is a pompous, arrogant arse."

"I think they're rather well-matched," Albus said with a tiny smile. He ignored Lily's scoff and nodded to himself, thinking over her proposal. "I suppose we can find room for them."

"Have Severus look after until I can take them on again. I'll be back. Lavender's only got therapy until Easter, in March, and then, she can go back to Hogwarts. And by then, *hopefully*, Harry won't mind me teaching here. But, only teaching," Lily said pointedly.

Albus nodded, not even bothering to argue with her.

"I don't mind the idea. However, *you* must be the one to ask Severus."

Lily grimaced.

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione rubbed her temples, irritated by the amount of talking happening in the trainee room. It ceased for just a moment when everyone looked at her and then began again, lower and even more pointed. She wondered if this was what Harry felt like when everyone had found out that he was fucking Riddle.

"*Je pense que—*"

"*Je ne sais pas,* Draco. *Nous—*"

Hermione sighed, tapping her foot as she stared at the pale giants hanging out in front of her cupboard. Draco deigned to look at her, rolling his eyes before he turned back to Astoria and began speaking in fast-paced French again. Hermione's mouth dropped open and she glanced

at Ron and Neville in disbelief. Ron ducked his head, awkwardly, but Neville was shaking his head, his lips pursed.

“Move,” Hermione barked. “Or you will be moved.”

Astoria’s eyebrows rose and she took a step back, suddenly uneasy. Draco followed her and Hermione nodded at them both as she rummaged through her cupboard, searching for her hunter green robes. She began to strip immediately and Draco gasped.

“You’re not going to change in the *bathroom*?” Draco demanded. “How uncouth!”

“Aren’t you French?” Hermione barked. “Don’t you have a reputation for this sort of thing?”

Ron snorted behind his hand, rolling his eyes.

"He is still a frigid Englishman where it counts," Astoria teased. Draco scowled at her but didn't respond as they moved to the corner to chat.

Ron and Neville sidled up to Hermione’s side as she pulled her robes on.

“What are *they* doing here?” Ron asked darkly.

Hermione frowned. “I’m not sure. Healer Evans probably turned them loose. Lavender’s being discharged today. I’m going to check in with Emmeline today.”

“Why are you hanging with Em? Actually, have you seen her? I've been trying to look for her, to ask if we're still on for our pub thing on Friday, but I can't seem to find her," Ron said patiently and Hermione crossed her arms, careful not to make eye contact with him. She caught Neville's eyes, and he was looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

Hermione’s cheeks went hot.

“I’m permanently on Healer Vance’s service,” Hermione said quietly.

Neville’s eyes widened. “Permanently? So, that means…”

"I'm going to specialize in Creature-Induced Injuries," Hermione said. She nearly collapsed in gratitude as Harry flew into the room, looking a tad less put together than usual, which wasn't saying much. "Oh, there you are!"

“Sorry, was wishing Lav well. Pass my robes?” Harry shouted as he wrestled out of his jumper. Hermione reached into his cupboard and tossed his robes just as Harry pulled his jumper over his head. He caught it after a weak fumble before tossing his jumper back to her. He paused, finally noticing Draco and Astoria. His nose wrinkled. “What are *you* two doing here? Don’t you have somewhere to be? Like up my mum’s arse?”

Ron snorted behind his hand. Draco sneered.

“We do what we are told. Unlike some trainees,” Draco said dismissively.

Harry huffed. “Why hasn’t she sent the two of you back to Paris?” he demanded, obnoxiously putting on a fake French accent. Draco’s scowl sent a vicious sort of pleasure through Harry as he stuffed his bag in his cupboard.

“Probably because we’re now students of this program,” Astoria said dryly.

“You’re *joking*,” Ron groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Why? Can’t take any more competition, Weasley?” Smith mocked from his cupboard. Ron flipped the bird at him and Smith rolled his eyes. He sauntered up to Draco, sticking out his poncy hand while running his other poncy hand through his poncy hair. “I’m Zacharias Smith. It’s a pleasure to finally meet other trainees of my caliber.”

“What caliber?” Neville muttered under his breath.

“It is good to finally meet people with proper manners,” Draco returned.

Astoria huffed. “Do not be obnoxious, Draco.”

“Too late,” Harry grumbled.

They pretended not hear one another, loudly slamming cupboards closed. Smith and Draco were already gossiping to one another, like old birds that had known each other their entire lives. Harry swallowed, trying not to listen in.

“*Oui*, I do not understand this program, you see,” Draco was saying. “Perhaps, it is true. Some *did* get in because of their parental connections.

“Harry…” Hermione warned.

Harry spun, his wand out. “The fuck did you just say?”

Draco looked up, his eyes carefully wide with innocence. “*Comment?*”

“Don’t play innocent, Malfoy. It’s not a good look on you. I didn’t get here because of some parental connection. I got here on pure talent, you arrogant prick,” Harry snarled. He stormed past the Frenchman, Hermione, Neville, and Ron following after him.

“What a fucking arse,” Ron spat. “Hermione, you should’ve let Harry hex him. *I* should’ve hexed him.”

"Then, you'd be in trouble. Come on. We've work to do," Hermione said primly, careful not to make eye contact with Ron as he hurried forward, pulling her bushy hair up to the top of her head in a shape vaguely resembling the leaves of a pineapple.

“Healer McGonagall. Please tell me I’m dealing with an internal procedure,” Harry begged as he spotted their mentor.

McGonagall raised a single eyebrow but seemed to think better than to ask.

“No, Potter. Today is your first skills lab,” McGonagall said. They all exchanged glances. They understood what a skills lab meant.

Hermione beamed. “Oh, really? Is it History of Healing?” she asked.

“Oh, is it poison training?” Neville blurted out.

“Bloody hell, I hope it’s E&T training,” Ron said. “I’m pretty bloody good at it. You know, Bellatrix isn’t that awful—”

"Please shut the fuck up," Harry barked. Ron looked put out and prepared to retort back, but Harry was already turning back to McGonagall. The woman looked grim. "Oh, please. Don't tell me…"

Harry closed his eyes. He prayed for anything else. The greenhouses. History of Healing. Artifact training. Hopefully, curses and its countercurses. He would rather stare at Tom teaching—which was always incredibly sexy. Shit, he’d even rather E&T with Bellatrix Black, the bitch.

“Report down to the potions lab.”

Anything but that. *Fuck.*

DIAGNOSIS

“Welcome to your first skills lab. You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making.”

Harry hid his sneer behind his hand. Snape spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word. Even the way he breathed seemed malevolent, though Harry had to acknowledge that the Healer had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. He glanced behind to the two potion stations on either side of him. Ron and Neville seemed confident enough—they had been working with Snape on and off for months. Astoria and Draco, on the other side of Hermione and his station, looked smug.

“As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you must hardly believe this is magic. Though you attended school, I doubt you truly understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses,” Snape intoned, looking at them with such doubt that Harry rolled his eyes. “I can teach you how to bottle health, brew bones, even stopper life.”

More silence followed the Healer’s speech. Harry and Hermione exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Draco was leaning forward, his eyes bright with excitement.

“Now, before we begin, let us make sure you aren’t a host of idiots. Potter!” said Snape sharply. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Harry’s mind went blank.

He had done well on his OWLs and NEWTs. True, he hated Potions in his time at Hogwarts, but he had done *well*. And suddenly, he could remember nothing. Harry glanced at Hermione. She was watching, her mouth wide open and her hand shot up in the air, attempting to save him. Harry looked over at Draco, panicked. The French man smirked at him, coolly raising a finger.

“That would be the *mort-vivant de potion.* The Draught of Living Death,” Draco said calmly.

“Thank you, Mr. Malfoy,” Snape said softly, his black eyes glittering. “Tut, tut. A famous mother clearly isn’t everything. What a shame for the ‘future of medicine’. Isn’t that what they call you?”

Harry’s cheeks burned.

"I momentarily forgot. It's a fourth-year potion," Harry said through gritted teeth. "And it isn't even a healing potion."

“Let’s try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

"The stomach of a goat," Harry spat. "Let's try something that a first-year Hogwarts student wouldn't know, shall we?"

Snape bared his teeth.

“Today, we will be brewing the simple Allergy elixir from memory. Your time begins now,” Snape snarled.

The room spun into action, and they ran, a pack of rabid animals. Hermione shoved Patil and Harry elbowed Smith out of the way as they reached for the cauldrons. There were only two copper cauldrons. Harry reached up but a hand shot over him, snatching one, nearly dropping it on his head. Harry spun around, his eyes narrowed.

Draco smirked and flounced away.

“Fuck,” Harry hissed. He turned back to grab the second one, but Hermione was already embroiled in a battle with Ron about it.

“Give me that copper cauldron this minute, Weasley,” Hermione barked.

“Not a chance, hag. Snape says that the better quality the cauldron, the better the brew,” Ron said snottily.

“Exactly. That’s why *we* need it,” Hermione said through clenched teeth.

Neville shrugged nervously. “Next time, Hermione. Grab that last brass one.”

Harry and Hermione turned and Hermione’s hand flew out like a claw full of talons. Her fingers wrapped around Hannah Abbott’s reaching wrist.

“Don’t even *think* about it, Abbott,” Hermione growled.

Abbott jerked back, alarmed, and Harry grinned viciously, plucking it from the shelf.

“Good luck with the shitty pewter cauldron,” he said, unnecessarily mean.

“Prat,” Abbott muttered under her breath as Hermione and Harry jerked towards the well-stocked shelves, searching through it.

Patil and Smith were already there, arguing softly.

“You need to grab the ginger root and bouncing spider juice,” Smith snapped.

Patil scoffed. “You’re an idiot, Smith. Those ingredients aren’t in Allergy Elixir.”

“They so *are*.”

“They so *aren’t*.”

"Excuse me, children. How about we let the Healers do their job?" Hermione asked primly. Harry grinned viciously at her. Good, so she wouldn't be holding him back during the skills lab. She wanted to win just as much.

Excellent.

“Oh, well we can’t all be *published* as a trainee,” Smith spat.

“No, we can’t,” Hermione said with a cool smile.

“Ugh, why are you being such a bitch?” Patil hissed.

Hermione leaned forward. “Because this is a skills lab. Our first one. He’s evaluating us to see who they’re going to *drop* from the program.”

The words hovered in the air between them before the four Healers-in-training spun into action. Hermione grabbed a small basket and the pair made quick work of gathering their ingredients. They paused as they finished it off, pulling down the 1-liter bottle of water. Hermione grabbed Harry's wrist, looking up at him.

“What?” Harry asked.

“We’re going to be fine,” Hermione said firmly. “You’re not going to be dropped from the program just because Snape is a prick. Riddle won’t let it happen. Your mum won’t let it happen. I won’t let it happen. *You* won’t let it happen. You deserve to be here.”

“Yeah,” Harry whispered. “Yeah.”

They walked back to their desk, setting the brass cauldron on top of the burner. Harry rearranged the ingredients. He placed the liter of water at the corner of the desk—the small bag of Billywig stings, the handful of Mandrake roots, the tiny phial of eucalyptus oil, the squeeze bottle of honey, the tiny pot of fairy wings, and the mason jar of eel eyes followed. Hermione pulled out their mortar and pestle.

“Start the base while I crush the ingredients,” Hermione commanded. She picked out three fairy wings and four dried Billywig stings and began to crush them into a fine powder.

Harry turned to the cauldron and poured the liter of water into it. He frowned, looking around for the Flobberworm mucus.

“There’s something we have to add to the base. To reduce the chances of it reacting badly,” Harry said.

Hermione frowned. “I’ve memorized the entire Healing Potion Index. That’s not true.”

“It *is*,” Harry insisted. Lily might’ve been a Potions Mistress, once upon a time. When he was a little kid, he had sometimes watched her brew until he lost interest, and she almost always added Flobberworm mucus.

Or was it bubotuber pus?

Fuck.

“Harry,” Hermione began in that tone of voice that still grated sometimes. Her ‘*I know everything about Healing’* voice.

“Okay, whatever,” Harry muttered. “I can’t even remember which one it is anyway.”

He waved his wand and the burner came to life. Slowly, he turned his wand, bringing the flames up until they danced at the base. The water hissed softly. Harry took a step back and watched Hermione measure out two tablespoons of the powder she’d made. Harry continued, adding the eucalyptus oil. Hermione stirred it once clockwise.

“Add the honey,” she said. “Two tablespoons.”

“I *know*, Hermione. I’m going to be a Healer too,” he muttered under his breath as he did as she commanded.

Hermione lifted her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. You tried to add something weird to the base of the potion.”

"Shut up," Harry snapped, waving his wand and bringing the heat up. It had to be a 110 degrees Celsius for at least thirty-five seconds. He looked over at Neville and Ron. They were whispering at one. Neville looked a little nervous as Snape moved around the room, akin to an enormous bat. Harry looked at the French invaders. They were moving efficiently, all tall and pale and fucking *perfect.*

“Harry! It’s been forty seconds,” Hermione snarled.

Harry jumped. “*Fuck*,” he whispered, abruptly pulling the fire down. Hermione was glowering at him, but she didn’t say anything else as she dropped the three remaining, unground fairy wings into the cauldron.

She stirred the mixture counter-clockwise four times.

"Okay, now we let it brew for twenty-seven minutes. Go put away the ingredients we don't need before you hurt yourself or, worst, fuck up our potion," Hermione said grimly.

“Love you too, Hermione,” Harry said with a false grin. He didn’t argue with her. He really did need to step away. He picked up the honey jar, the eucalyptus oil, and the pot of fairy wings.

As he moved towards the shelves, he heard Snape.

“Entwhistle, are you an imbecile? You’ve ruined it,” Snape snarled. As he swooped down on the pair, Turpin turned to Entwhistle, her teeth bared at her partner. “Tell me, do you know what you’re creating in adding the mandrake root too early?”

“N-no, Healer,” Entwhistle stammered.

“Does anyone know?” Snape snarled, turning to the group at large. Everyone ducked their heads, trying to hide from Snape’s all-seeing eyes. Harry’s heart faltered when he saw Snape’s gaze settle on Neville’s back. “Longbottom!”

Neville didn’t even look up. “Yes, Healer?” he asked as he began to prepare his own Mandrake root. He was slicing it crosswise, each piece about eight millimeters in width.

“What does one get when dropping in a *whole* Mandrake root too early into this potion?” Snape snarled.

“A botched poison that will make a patient’s eardrums rupture and lose their hearing,” Neville said immediately.

One could hear a pin drop.

Harry glanced at Hermione. Hermione was staring, her jaw dropped, her knife hovering over their Mandrake root.

“We’ll make a Healer out of you yet, Longbottom,” Snape said gruffly, sounding snide and almost *triumphant.*

Neville looked up, satisfaction in his eyes. When Snape turned around to Vanish Entwhistle and Turpin’s potion, Neville practically collapsed with relief. The two disgraced trainees trudged out with their heads hanging low.

Harry scurried back to Hermione’s side after shelving their leftover ingredients.

“Merlin, that was…” Harry hissed.

"I know," Hermione muttered. "Go, Neville."

"Go, Neville," Harry repeated in slight awe. He tilted his head, regarding Neville. "That was kinda hot."

"Nope," Hermione said immediately.

"What?" Harry whined.

"Leave Neville alone. He doesn't need to be found dead in the alleyway outside. Riddle would murder him. And, anyway, he's sorta with Abbott now," Hermione said patiently.

Harry shrugged. "It was just a thought," he sighed. "He said he liked me."

"Neville likes things that aren't good for him. Like being tortured by Snape, regularly," Hermione reminded him.

"Touché."

The pair waited as the potion slowly changed to a navy blue over the next twenty or so minutes. Harry tilted his head as the steam rose from the cauldron. It was slightly cauliflower blue in color.

"That's not right," Harry whispered.

"It's because you kept the fire on too long," Hermione sighed.

Harry groaned. "And there's something *missing*. Fires don't ruin potions like that. Not five extra seconds. I *knew* we should've added something in the beginning. It stops potions from reacting weirdly all the time if there's a tiny mistake."

"I've never heard of anything like that," Hermione said as she added a sliced Mandrake root.

"My mum does it," Harry said pointedly, dropping three eel eyes in the cauldron.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "I feel like she would've published something of that nature if it were true."

"You are so frustrating," Harry sighed.

"You can't even remember what it was," Hermione pointed out.

Harry responded with a rude hand gesture to Hermione's amusement. He brought up the fire again and counted the seconds out loud, hissing them in Hermione's ear. She stifled her laughter against her wrist, shutting up immediately when Snape glared at them.

They did as the rest of recipe called for—a counter-clockwise turn here, two tables of eucalyptus oil there, and a final three times clockwise. They let the potion brew again.

Hermione glanced at the clock. "Okay, twenty-two minutes."

They waited patiently, glancing around. Nearly everyone else seemed on the same stage. Neville was excitedly explaining the attributes of Mandrakes and Mandrake roots to a bored Ron. Smith and Patil were arguing sharply over their little pewter cauldron. Abbott and Runcorn seemed to be pointedly ignoring one another. Harry finally turned to look at his mother's students. They were both watching him.

Draco looked fucking smug as always—and Merlin did Harry want to punch his pointy face. Astoria looked calm. She was watching him with those creepy fucking eyes.

Harry began to whittle away at the edge of the desk with the athame. Hermione shot him irritated glances that he ignored. He hadn't seen Lily all day. He hadn't seen James either. Neither of those things really set him on edge the same way as not seeing Tom. He hadn't seen Tom in ages except for in passing. Perhaps down a corridor or going into the lift, but never any other time. It was a double-edged sword.

When Harry saw Tom, he felt his heart ache. He felt lost, and his stomach turned. But, not seeing Tom wasn't great either. He thought about what the man was doing or, rather, *who* was doing. Harry thought about the fact that Tom must've been asking for someone *else* to assist on his work. Maybe another full-time, but there were few that could perform at the level Tom demanded. That meant it was probably another trainee.

Another trainee who was *stealing* his procedures.

Harry hadn't heard anything like that, but he was a paranoid bastard, and James' old Auror trainer was right about one thing—Constant vigilance.

He'd destroy *anyone* that was thinking about stealing his man and his procedures.

"Harry. *Harry*."

"What?" Harry asked through gritted teeth.

"You've impaled the table," Hermione said.

Harry looked down. The athame was buried halfway through the wood. Snape looked amused.

"What is going through your head right now?" Hermione whispered.

"Some bitch is stealing my Spell Damage procedures," Harry hissed back.

Hermione looked alarmed. "What in the hell gave you that idea?"

"Tom hasn't asked me to assist," Harry snapped.

"Um...because you *dumped* him?"

Both Harry and Hermione looked up. Ron was standing next to their table.

"It was mutual," Harry snapped.

“No break up is mutual,” Ron said, giving Hermione a meaningful look.

Hermione looked up at the ceiling as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

“Well, this one was. This...this is *worse* than cheating. He’s picking someone that isn’t *me* for procedures,” Harry said dramatically.

“Or maybe he just doesn’t have any procedures that he needs assistance on? He *is* a capable Healer,” Hermione reminded him.

“Am I interrupting?”

Ron nearly threw himself back into his seat. Snape sneered.

“No, Healer,” Hermione said primly. She didn’t look away from Snape, intent on waiting him out. Snape finally stormed away and Hermione glared at Ron. “You’re gonna get us in trouble.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Whatever, hag.”

They stared at each other for a second too long. Harry was watching her in surprise.

“Um, what?” he asked.

“Look at that. The potion is done,” Hermione said, waving her wand over the cauldron. The burner turned off immediately and she summoned the phial, waiting to bottle it.

Snape was already going his rounds. He stopped at Neville and Ron and was muttering his notes. Neville looked both chagrined and proud, nodding as he accepted his faults. It was a shorter list than expected, clearly. Snape moved back towards Smith and Patil, nodding at their passable potion. He made his way up to Harry and Hermione’s.

“The color is off,” Snape said immediately. He glared at them. “The fire was too high.”

“Only for five seconds,” Harry said.

Snape looked at him for a long moment and raised his chin. “It’s passable.”

“I know,” Harry snapped.

“I know, sir,” Snape prompted.

“There’s no need to call me sir, Healer.”

Silence again. Ron smothered his crying laughter.

Snape gritted his teeth and stormed away. Hermione turned to Harry immediately.

“What are you doing?” she hissed angrily. “You’re going to be sent to Dumbledore for being disrespectful to a superior.”

“He’s being a dick. Also, he’s panting after my mother’s pussy so that won’t ever happen,” Harry whispered back.

“You’re disgusting.”

Harry ignored her, looking over as Snape approached the French assholes’ table.

“Perfection,” Snape said in his same bland tone of voice.

“How?” Ron blurted out.

Snape hummed. “Tell them how you achieved the perfect Allergy Elixir.”

“Like Potter, we *also* kept hire on too high for too long. However, adverse reactions of that nature can be counteracted. *Guérisseur* Evans has long instructed us that adding Flobberworm mucus can both thicken a potion and correct small mistakes of that nature,” Draco said with a tight smile that morphed into a smirk as he looked at Harry. “You would think her *son* would be appraised of this notion."

Before Harry could respond, Snape was turning back to the trainees at large.

“Place your potion a testing phial and label them. Place them on my desk and report to your lunch hour. You will receive further instructions from your team Healer,” Snape barked and then he was disappearing through the door.

Harry let his head fall onto the table with a thump.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I didn’t—” Hermione started.

“No. My fault. I couldn’t remember if it was Flobberworm mucus or bubotuber pus,” Harry whispered as Hermione did Snape’s last task. Harry sat up again as Ron and Neville finished up and waited for them by the door.

“Good genes are not everything,” Draco drawled as he met Harry and Hermione at the door.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You know the French Revolution guys had the right idea. Decapitating poncy arseholes like *you*. You’ve got the perfect neck for it. A well-placed Cutting Curse would do the job. *Diff—*”

Draco squeaked and rushed off, Astoria rolling her eyes as she followed after him.

“Harry,” Neville sighed, looking at him judgingly.

Harry sneered. “I didn’t even have my wand out. Fucking prick.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry tried to pretend that he couldn't hear them. He tried his very best, but every time he heard his hand come out of Smith's mouth, he felt his spine snap straight.

"And then everyone found out that Potter was *fucking* Riddle, and *that* was why he was getting all of those procedures. Not because he has any talent. They were shouting about it right in the middle of everyone. It was *so* humiliating. And then, not long after that *you* and Astoria showed up with Lily Evans. I wonder if she knows what a slut her son is," Smith was saying as Draco, Astoria and he moved through the line. All three glanced back at Harry.

Harry's jaw clenched and he gave a painfully sarcastic smile. They turned back around immediately.

"I could set him straight if you want. Hex him a new arsehole," Ron offered.

"And give you a pleasure that is rightfully mine?" Harry asked with a vicious grin.

Ron grinned back.

"Nobody is even talking about you and Riddle anymore, Harry. And no one thinks you're a slut," Neville promised.

"Because they see me as a basket case after I flipped my shit on everyone. I'm that crazy mad slut that broke up the dream team. Whatever," Harry huffed. He paused as he looked over at Ron and Neville sighed. He rocked back and forth, worried. He looked back at their table. Hermione was picking over her food, a serious look on her face. "I think I need to talk to Hermione."

"Anything wrong?" Neville asked.

"Not sure yet," Harry drawled, glancing back at his friend. He grabbed his subpar sandwich and turned back to the pair. Ron looked nervous.

"Uh...hope everything's...good," Ron said.

"You're a fucking freak, Ron," Harry said, his voice flat.

The pair broke into grins, watching each other, and Harry ducked away, making a beeline for Hermione's table. He sat down across from her.

"Hey," Hermione said softly.

"It's just us today," Harry said. Hermione looked up, eyes wide. "You seem off your game."

"Really?" Hermione asked distractedly. "Not you? I mean you nearly botched our potion because you're thinking about—"

"Hey, no. We're not going to make this about me. It's about *you*. What is going on with you?" Harry demanded. "You're about to be published. You made medical history. You've got a badass mentor. You know what you're doing in life. So, why are you acting like you don't? You didn't yell at me properly for fucking up. So, I *know* something's off."

Hermione pursed her lips. Harry smirked, triumphant. He had dissected her faster than she expected. He reached over and took a chip off her plate.

“So...Ron kissed me.”

Harry choked on a chip. He hacked heavily, his body trembling with the force of his coughs as Hermione reached over the table to thump him on his back until he coughed it up. Her nose wrinkled as she stared at the half-chewed lump of potato on Harry's tray.

“Excuse the fuck out of me?” Harry demanded. “When did this happen? Why was I not told *immediately*?”

“You were a little busy making up with your mum, dumping your ex-boyfriend, and holding yourself together after your sister was mauled,” Hermione deadpanned.

Harry hummed. “Fine. I’ll allow it.”

“Oh, you’ll allow it?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

“Stop changing the subject! You tell me about Ron and I’ll tell you about Tom,” Harry offered.

“Is there something more to tell about Tom?” Hermione challenged.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, sheepishly. “I...I haven’t seen him, which means that someone else is getting my procedures!” he whined annoyingly.

Hermione grinned.

“Okay. I...so, we were in Emmeline’s office. Emmeline, Ron, and I. And we were figuring out what to do about Lavender. And it was like I had this mental block. But, then it disappeared and I knew that it had to be unicorn hair and he said ‘You’re fucking brilliant, you witch’, and he kissed me,” Hermione said, her smile fading away and her voice growing softer.

“You like him,” Harry breathed. “You *like-like* him. You *fancy* him.”

“Fuck off,” Hermione muttered.

Harry huffed. "Why aren't you buggering by now? Or at least gone out to dinner?"

“We live together,” Hermione pointed out. “It could end horribly.”

“Or it might not. You might get *married* and have a little *house* and you’ll be a Healing *super couple* and he might have your *babies*,” Harry cackled.

“Oh my God, you’re a child,” Hermione said through her laughter.

“No, you are. Because you two are being awkward arseholes,” Harry grinned. “What is your damage?”

“I...may have traded him away?” Hermione said, raising an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Emmeline was going to leave. To replace your mum in France. I couldn’t let that happen,” Hermione said firmly. “She’s...she’s *my* teacher. She’s the best. I want the best. I can’t let her leave. She made me feel...she made me feel *alive*, Harry. Would you give up Tom as your teacher?”

“Never,” Harry breathed, looking almost in awe. “So...what do you mean you traded him?”

“Emmeline...turns out she has feelings for Ron. Like deep feelings. And she thought it was ‘Ron and Emmeline’ but there’s me. And now she’s threatening to leave. I told her...I’d give her anything. And she wanted him,” Hermione whispered, her face twisted painfully. “But, she’s an amazing teacher and I want her. I need *her*.”

“Fuck, Hermione. You...wow,” Harry murmured in pained awe. “Okay. You can’t talk like this. I get you, but other people don’t. So you can’t talk like this. It’s like telling someone their baby is ugly. You know it. I know it. But you can’t tell them that. Because it makes you an arse.”

“But...you’re talking about Healing, right?” Hermione asked. “Wand to your head, you would choose Healing over Riddle, right?”

Harry blanched. “Uh...yeah, but you can’t talk about this. Because it makes you sound crazy,” Harry hesitated. “Do you feel bad?”

Hermione bit her bottom lip. “That’s why I’ve been off...I don’t know.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Knock, knock,” Lily said, pressing against the doorframe.

Severus looked up from his work, the ugly expression on his face melting away for something much kinder. Lily’s lips curled into a soft grin. There he was—it was rare for the Severus she knew as a little girl to emerge, but there he was. The kind, sweet boy that had always been on her side when Tuney was a bitch or one of her friends called her freak. The sweet boy that had always defended her from being called a ‘Mudblood’ by his bigoted housemates.

“Lily,” he said. A wry twist to his mouth. “Do you now have time for your oldest friend?”

Lily huffed, some of the tension she always carried on her shoulders melting away.

“I was a little *preoccupied* before, Severus,” Lily reminded him. She fell into the chair across from his, slumping back slightly. Severus always put her at ease. She trusted him almost as

much as she trusted her husband.

“How is your adopted progeny?” Severus asked.

Lily smiled. “Settling in at home. She’ll be doing physical therapy on a rotation with Lovegood and Vance will check in on her in another week or so to make sure everything is healing well. She’s with James and Sirius.”

She waited patiently, but Severus’ large hooked nose wrinkled and he looked back down at his work. He was sneering. Lily felt her heart twinge. Her argument was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn’t say anything just yet. After all, she wanted something from him, and she didn’t want to start an argument. They always argued about the same things.

“The trainees had their first skills lab today. Your students did well,” Severus said calmly. He leaned back in his chair, an interesting expression on his face. “They knew our trick with the Flubberworm mucus.”

“Of course they do. Draco may have dreams of glamorous internal procedures, but he needs to know the basics,” Lily said firmly. She tilted her head, frowning lightly. “Astoria would be better suited for Mind Healing. I might ask Albus to have her on his service.”

Severus faltered at her words, but he pushed them aside for another time.

“Your *son* didn’t know.”

Lily sighed, looking ages older and feeling it too. “He wouldn’t.”

“And why is that? You have a potions lab in your home, do you not?” Severus asked.

“Come off it, Sev. I was a shitty mother. You think I passed down my Potions tips?” she demanded.

Severus scoffed. “You were *busy*. You didn’t intend to get pregnant with the boy, and you had a career to think about it,” Severus defended.

“Don’t make excuses for me,” Lily snarled. Severus reared back, surprised, and Lily’s expression grew cold as she distanced herself from the conversation. “I made mistakes. Terrible mistakes. It was a calculated risk and I calculated wrong. I thought I could have it all, and maybe some can, but I’m not one of them. I was considered for my own glory.”

Severus was silent for a long moment

“Your son is like you in that manner,” Severus said grudgingly. “He had the third best potion from the skills lab.”

“Good. Above the threshold. He’ll do well in the rest of them. He won’t be dropped from the program,” Lily said, feeling a little more than relieved. “When are the next skills lab?”

“No, he won’t be dropped, but I’m in the process of evaluating who will be. Albus will make final decisions after he looks over their files. After they announce their specialty, they’ll be

individually evaluated by Department Heads. You don't need to worry about your son. Riddle will—I'm sure—go easy on him," Severus said, cruel as always.

"Severus…" Lily warned. She sighed, letting it go for now. "Severus, I'm staying. You know this."

"Yes, of course. I did want to consult you about that. There are quite a few trainees vying to be on your service—"

"Actually...I'm not going to be working," Lily corrected. Severus' eyes widened. "That's...well...I need someone to take on my students. Draco and Astoria. I believe that your teaching style is similar enough to mine that it won't be too much of a disruption in their education."

Lily watched Severus work through her words. His elation dimmed almost completely, and was replaced by pride at her flattery, and then finally acceptance. He looked up at her and nodded once. Sometimes, she hated how he looked at her. Like she had hung the moon. She averted her gaze again.

"Of course. Have you spoken with Albus about this yet?" Severus asked.

"Yes. He agreed with me," Lily said. She gave him a grin, and he fell back in his chair, basking in the glow of it. "But...one thing."

"Anything," he said. He didn't look like he meant to say that out loud.

"You didn't ask about James. It was a little rude," Lily snapped pointedly.

Severus groaned. "I knew that was going to come up. Waiting until I agreed to teach your students?"

"Of course," Lily retorted. "No need to be a prick to my husband, Sev."

"No need for your husband to be a prick, *Lil*s," he said, snarkily. Lily's nose wrinkled. She hated that mocking caricature he made out of James' nickname for her almost as much as Severus hated being called 'Sev'. "Now, tell me about your current research."

"Okay: panacea. Phoenix tears," Lily began. "But, in potion form."

Severus leaned forward. "Intriguing. Phoenix tears are expensive. No one would be able to afford it," he said, and Lily nodded aggressively.

"Yes, but *synthetic* phoenix tears."

"Oh, doubly intriguing. Do go on."

DIAGNOSIS

“Harry. Harry. Harry.”

Harry huffed, ignoring the man stalking him down the hallway. It was just like the beginning, with the man being so damned impatient and irritating. There was only so many bedroom eyes and covert glances that Harry could take in a fucking week. He’d thought that breaking up permanently with the man would’ve done the trick, but instead, they’d just reverted to this strange in-between state that—if Harry was being honest with himself—he didn’t mind.

Except, the man had been *clearly* professionally cheating on him.

“Harry, sweetheart, please don’t ignore me.”

Harry whipped around, his eyes narrowed as Tom came to a stop in front of him, only a few centimeters away.

“You’ve been professionally cheating on me,” Harry said sharply and then stormed away.

“What? Wait, Harry, what?” Tom asked, following after him and then cutting him off by the lifts.

“What do you want *now*, Tom?” Harry sighed.

“You said I was professionally cheating on you,” Tom pointed out.

Harry looked away. “I’m sorry, no I didn’t.”

“Really, Harry? This is what we’re doing?”

“We’re not doing anything,” Harry said, pursing his lip and looking away primly.

Tom smirked down at him. “Am I bothering you, Harry?”

“You’re stopping me from doing my work, so *yes,* you’re bothering me,” Harry retorted, one hand on his hip as he glared up at the man.

“So *rude*.” He sounded fucking delighted by it.

He looked at Harry with a fondness that made Harry shiver.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Harry said roughly.

Tom’s smile widened. “Like what?”

Harry shook his head, huffing under is breath. Tom was looking at him like he used to, like he was extraordinary, and beautiful and like he *loved* him.

He wouldn’t give voice to his thoughts. Not when it wasn’t enough.

"Was there a reason you were yelling at me?" Harry asked instead.

“I got the grant.”

“You told me that,” Harry said impatiently.

"And I need someone to assist with my project," Tom said. He leaned forward. "I choose you."

“No.”

Tom’s eyes opened wide and he looked down at Harry in utter shock.

“What do you mean ‘no’? I just offered you a chance at medical history!” Tom snapped, irritation dancing at the corner of his burgundy eyes. Harry crossed his arms, his lips pursed and eyes unimpressed.

“I didn’t ask for it,” Harry muttered.

Tom leaned forward, raising an eyebrow. “You’re okay with Granger making medical history before you? Because that’s what happened last week. *She* made medical history. Her name is going to be in print in all of the medical journals, along with Vance’s. *She’s* revolutionizing her field.”

Harry squirmed at Tom’s words. That burning sensation that he had been feeling since Lavender’s procedure was back. He’d been able to ignore it for the first few days, buried beneath his relief and the relatively new feeling of contentment, but now it was back. Every time he heard Hermione or Vance’s names and about what they had accomplished made him twitch. When he had heard from Lily that Hermione and Vance were already scheduling interviews for after the publication was finished, he had practically spilled his water all over himself like a fucking child. Lavender had laughed herself silly.

“I’m happy for her,” Harry said. That wasn’t a lie. He really *was* happy for Hermione.

Tom didn’t look like he believed him.

“But, you wish it was you, don’t you?” he asked. Tom’s eyes softened. “Harry, what I’m doing...it’s not going to be just learning how to sew someone up or to eliminate scarring. Harry, I’m going to conquer *death*.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Conquer death? Really?”

“Yes, really,” Tom insisted.

“And what does your fiancee think about this? Working with me?” he demanded.

“I’m not with Bellatrix anymore, and you know it,” Tom said firmly.

“Do I?” Harry shot back.

“You do,” Tom hissed. “And I’m asking to work with you. Not date you. After all, you just said I was professionally cheating on you because—I’m going to make an assumption, here

—I haven't been asking you to come in on my procedures."

Well, wasn't that a blow to Harry's ego? He worked to keep his hurt from his face, and he wasn't sure if he succeeded or not. Tom's expression didn't change from his irritating smugness nor did Harry expect it to.

"Well, I'll think about it," Harry allowed.

Tom's lips curled into a smirk and he nodded. "Good."

"Tom...this is going to be weird. I know it will," Harry said quietly.

"No, it won't. I'll prove to you that we can work together," Tom insisted. Harry looked at him, doubtfully. Tom sighed. "I swear that we can. Now, I have an Auror that's been hit with a Yaa Sang curse, and I need to pencil in his procedure. I'll see you later, Harry."

He turned on his heel without another word, sauntering off.

Harry swallowed and whispered after him, "Later, Tom."

Harry sighed, collected himself, and then walked towards the lift. He had a curse to study.

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione was waiting for the right moment to ambush the woman.

It had been happening lately. Emmeline Vance was quite noticeable—she was tall, pale, curvy, and her lips were always bright red. It was easy to spot her coming. It was probably easy to spot Hermione too with her enormous hair and her dark skin. So, it was *easy* for Emmeline to avoid her and easy for Hermione to fucking notice.

Hermione cornered her in her office.

Vance was a bit of a fool for that one if she thought something as petty as 'personal boundaries' would stop Hermione from talking to the woman.

"Healer Vance," Hermione said briskly.

Vance looked caught as she gathered her files. "Ah...Granger...you're supposed to be in the pharmacy today."

"As I've been in every other fucking department in this hospital for the past week when I haven't been checking up on our patient?" Hermione asked. She took a step forward, her eyes glinting. "At the risk of sounding like a crazy, jealous girlfriend, I *know* what you've been doing and I know why. You've been getting McGonagall to keep me away from you."

“Ah...Granger, you know...it wasn’t for my benefit,” Vance said primly. “I thought you’d be embarrassed about what you...said.”

Hermione lifted her chin. “Well, I’m not.”

Vance looked thrown, her jaw dropping open. And then anger rushed across her face and she took a threatening step forward. Hermione held her ground, glaring back at the woman.

"You're not embarrassed by offering to trade Ron like a horse or a Chocolate Frogs card or a stale biscuit from last week's tea," Vance spat. "You really *don't* deserve him.”

“I never claimed I did,” Hermione snapped back. Vance looked surprised by her words. Hermione used the momentum of the other woman’s silence. “Ron is a nice guy. Ron is a nice, *good* guy who doesn’t put up with my bullshit, and has an inferiority complex the size of my own. Ron is pigheaded and tactless and can be *rude*. But, he’s good. Probably too good for me. And what I did was thoughtless, but I’m not embarrassed. Not after what we did together.”

Vance's eyes had widened more and more over her speech, her perfectly arched eyebrows traveling higher and higher. "What we did together?" she repeated.

“You get it,” Hermione whispered. “I choose Healing over a guy.”

Vance glowered at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not going to apologize for it. Especially to you. And Ron wouldn’t ask me to,” Hermione said firmly. She was so sure of that. Ron was an arrogant, pigheaded shithead, but he knew her, and she knew him, and he wouldn’t ever think less of her because of her choice, not that she meant to tell him anytime soon.

“We sewed a girl back together. That’s not better than *love*. Pure, honest love,” Vance said as if she were speaking to a child. “Healing is a job. You lose your job, you can find another one. But, if you lose your love...what do you have left?”

And Hermione knew then that Harry was right. To others, she must sound crazy. She must sound insane for loving the work she did with her own two hands, more than another person. Except...except…

“No. You misunderstand,” Hermione said firmly and Vance fell silent. “I choose my gift. Because that’s what I have. I have a *gift*. I choose my gift, and I want to be great. And I want to learn from *you*. I choose my gift. I choose myself.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Draco, I need you to fetch potions from the pharmacy,” Healer Sprout had said.

Draco looked over at his temporary teacher, deeply unimpressed with the dumpy woman. She stared back at him, just as bland. Her tone broke no argument. *This* was the education that he was giving up because Lily wanted to play caretaker. How fucking wonderful.

He was surrounded by idiots. Smith was sycophant in the making, Patil was an arrogant bitch —much like Astoria, but unlike Astoria, she didn't have half the talent she thought she did— and Abbott was a quiet mouse. Astoria found them amusing, the way children were amusing.

Draco *hated* children.

"Why?" he asked childishly.

"Because my patients need their prescriptions before their discharged," Sprout said, speaking to him slowly and enunciate every word.

"I do speak English. That is offensive," Draco snapped.

"Draco, *tu es irritant*. *S'il te plaît,*" Astoria snarled, at her breaking point. Everyone seemed surprised to see her emote. Draco winced. Nearly immediately after her outburst, she looked impassive once more. "I am afraid we cannot fulfill your task. Guérisseur wants us to report to her soon."

Sprout looked less annoyed when Astoria spoke. Draco took that for the old woman disliking men or rather younger people, in general, that clearly surpassed her in skill and looks. Or perhaps she was a xenophobe. Draco couldn't claim to know the woman and he hoped never had to.

Before Draco could make another comeback, Astoria was already dragging him away, berating him in fast-paced French. Instead of annoying Draco, he reveled in it. Astoria was always at her most beautiful when he was threatening her, and he had missed his native language more than he wanted to personally admit. His joy was torn away when he caught sight of Harry Potter. Draco jerked to a stop, pulling Astoria back next to him.

"*Regardes lui*," Draco murmured. Astoria hummed.

Harry was talking softly to a matron. She looked worried and was speaking to him fast and Harry nodded along to her words before they took off down the hallway, walking at a brisk pace. Draco took off immediately, ignoring Astoria's words of discouragement. She was always telling Draco not to do things. It was always *Draco, no*. Sometimes, Draco wondered why it couldn't be, *Draco, yes.* It should always be *Draco, yes*.

They followed the Potter and the matron down the flight of stairs, making sure to match their footsteps with the pair in front of them. Harry went down another flight of stairs but Astoria jerked him to a stop.

"*Il va au théâtre*," Astoria hissed.

Draco's eyes widened the *theatre*. They rushed back up the stairs to the galleries and popped their head in each one until finally, they found the one that Harry had apparently wandered

into. It wasn't unoccupied.

A young man—probably an Auror—was prone on the grey operating slab. Only his penis and testicles were draped, but the rest of him was wane. His chest was waxed clean.

Draco's lips parted as he watched Harry step forward, sliding dragonhide gloves onto his hands. Riddle grinned over at him, nodding. Harry rolled his eyes and nodded back. They didn't need to share any other words.

"It's a beautiful day to conquer death!" Riddle announced. He opened his mouth again.

"Let's have some fun," Harry interrupted.

And Riddle stared at him with this deep indiscernible emotion that Draco cringed away from. Riddle nodded once and pulled his wand. Harry did the same, tilting his head.

"Make the first cut. First, make the incision across the entire abdominal and chest area. Then, open the abdominal wall."

And Draco gasped as he realized that he was about to witness his first internal procedure. Harry raised his wand and as if he were practiced, he drew his wand over the skin, opening the patient's abdomen from sternum to groin, and then another wave of his wand and the silver instruments were pulling skin and muscle apart. Draco looked down.

He could see the insides of a man. He could see a man's small bowel, slippery with blood and pink looking. There were black tendrils running just underneath the thin membrane, as if pumping poison through the blood. He could further up, the man's lungs working, laced with black. He thought if he could squint, he could see the man's *heart*—a plump swell of flesh nestled between.

It was something that Draco had only ever seen in books and cadavers. Never something *living*. It was different from watching a moving picture. It was...beautiful and terrifying. Draco's stomach turned. All that blood. Riddle was making quick of irrigating the area and using suction to clear the debris and excess blood away.

"Let's get to work," Harry said. "Yaa Sang does damage continuously until it's all gone. It's both parasite and curse."

"You did your research," Riddle teased.

Harry hummed. "As soon as I heard, I knew you'd call me."

And then Draco was witness to some of the greatest magic he'd ever seen. The pair of them were methodical in the curse's destruction, cauterizing it as if it were an open wound. They siphoned black tendrils from the red organs, returning them to their former state, blasting away the curse with what looked like a strange variation of *Incendio*. Even from his hiding place, the hairs on Draco's arm stood up.

"He's…" Astoria breathed.

“He’s extraordinary.”

The two spun and looked at Lily. She was leaning against the doorframe, never looking away as Harry whipped his wand over his head as a bleeder spurted out. He captured the blood, redirecting it into a phial.

“You finish the heart when we get to it,” Riddle said.

Draco couldn’t help his sharp intake of breath.

Harry looked up, eyes narrowed at Riddle.

“You really want me on your project so badly you’ll risk a patient's life?” Harry demanded.

Riddle didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

Harry snorted. “You’re fucked up.”

Those words seemed to do something to Riddle. He stopped his work for only half a second before he continued on. Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and he looked at Riddle with something like adoration. Draco’s eyes widened. That same adoration was in Riddle’s burgundy eyes, tilting his lips into a soft smile.

“You’re fucked up,” Riddle whispered.

Harry winced.

“If the patient doesn’t die, I’ll work on your project,” Harry said. “Even with the work we’ve done, there’s a mortality rate of 83%.”

“We’re the 17%, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart.

And Draco knew all about the pair of them. He knew about the sordid love affair of Harry Potter and his *teacher*, Tom Riddle. He had heard about Harry Potter the whore, Harry Potter the bitch, Harry Potter the arse who thought that he deserved everything. He had heard it from more than one person—his aunt, Smith, and even Abbott hadn’t been able to help but cast doubt in her small little voice, talking about how suspicious it looked that he was getting all of the best procedures.

So, Draco had heard all of these things.

But, he hadn’t heard about Harry Potter the adored, because the man that watched him work *adored* him.

He hadn’t heard about Harry Potter the great, because Harry Potter was going to be *great*.

“Okay. Let’s do this. It’s in his heart, but it’s going to start spreading again where it thinks it can. It won’t go to the parts we’ve cauterized. That’s dangerous, that’s stupid, and *this* isn’t a

stupid curse. So, that means it's going to travel to his brain next. We can't let that happen," Harry said, taking a deep breath. He rolled back his shoulders and cracked his neck, tilting his head as he observed the man. "Be prepared to bring him back, okay?"

"What are you planning?" Riddle asked curiously.

"It's like an organ right? The Yaa Sang. It's a parasite as much of a curse. So, that implies it's...living. Sorta. It's living off his body. What can't we live without?" Harry asked. He answered his own question. "Breath."

Riddle grinned viciously. "Creative."

"And we're going to paralyze his lungs now," Harry murmured for Riddle's benefit. He pressed the tip of his wand to the trachea. "*Petrificus*."

The lungs stilled, not a single breath. The man seemed to stiffen up. There was a moment where their wands flashed red sparks, and then they stopped as the man seemingly died.

"You've got four minutes before brain damage beings," Riddle said. He waved his wand setting a timer. "Go."

"So...I'm going to...suction it away," Harry breathed softly. "Because now, it's nothing but matter. Just errant magic. So I suction it away and cauterized where it touched. Right?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Riddle asked.

Harry looked up, wide-eyed. "If I'm wrong?"

"He dies. Or I save him. But, currently, you have three minutes and twenty-seven seconds."

"Fuck." And then Harry bent his head and began to work, his glasses slipping down his nose. Slowly, he moved his wand in smooth circles, jerking it back every time he finished a rotation, the same motion that one made when casting a Tergeo, but something *else* was happening. The black tendrils were slowly peeling away from the man's still heart.

Draco's jaw dropped.

"Lily...he's incredible," Astoria whispered.

Lily nodded, never looking away as Harry pulled death away from a man's heart, wrestling the blackness as it writhed and screamed on the tip of his wand.

"How is he doing that?" Draco demanded. "That's not the countercurse."

Lily nodded, taking another step in. "No. It's not."

Harry ground his teeth, sweat pouring down from his forehead as he hissed out cauterizing spells each time a new tendril freed itself from the tender organ. With nothing to feed off of, the black tendrils of the curse were curling in on itself, crumbling away into nothingness. It couldn't even be called a proper death.

“He’s...like you,” Draco said grudgingly. “Powerful.”

“He’s...more than me. I can’t take credit for talent like that,” Lily said. She looked fascinated. “That’s...that’s not like me at all. I’m methodical. I’m practiced and learned. That, my students, is called instinct.”

Draco looked back at the theatre and he flinched back from Riddle’s glare. He glanced back at Harry, but the other man was concentrated. Finally, the man was done, and the last of the Yaa Sang curse spat and hissed before disappearing into the ether. Riddle cleared his throat.

“Twelve seconds. Perfect,” Riddle said, waving his wand. He Banished the counter in one wave and waved his wand, muttering the counter curse to Harry’s paralysis spell in the next moment. “*Astrapi*.”

The man’s entire body jerked with the jolt, and Harry breathed a sigh of release when the heart began to pink up again, sputtered and then beat fresh blood. He peered at the body, looking for any other spots of black.

“I did it. I *did* it. I *Healed* him,” Harry whispered, joy flashing across his features, and suddenly, Draco saw what others might see in him, why though people hated him, they thought that he was beautiful and exciting and intriguing.

“You did your job. The job you love,” Riddle said pointedly.

Harry grinned. “Oh shut up. Let’s tidy him up and write his prescription. He’s going to be in a world of pain when he wakes up.”

“Oh, are *you* the Head Healer on this case now? You’re *my* boss?”

“I am now. After all, *I* Healed a heart.”

“I’ve could’ve done it too. Maybe not using the same methods, but probably faster.” Riddle was a petty man, wasn’t he?

“Yes, well, I did it, so shut up,” Harry said.

Draco and Astoria leaned forward, ready to see the procedure to its end, but Lily grabbed both of them by the shoulder, pulling them away from the glass.

“Come now. You’ve paperwork to fill out so that you’re fully integrated into the program. And we’ll need to find you both accommodations if you don’t want to stay at Malfoy Manor,” Lily said.

Perish the thought. Draco grimaced and with great difficulty tore himself away. He no longer mourned the fact that he would finish his education in England. Now, he felt a sense of buzzing excitement coursing through his body. There was something that tasted like humbling at the back of his tongue, and perhaps, that was the right word. Watching that had been extraordinary. It had been *humbling*.

Draco had witnessed greatness. And it was a greatness that would revolutionize the world.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, hello world!

I've returned.

Hello, world! I've returned. Here is the official beginning of Part Two of this story! Let’s gooooo!

I'm really excited for what's coming up. It's going to be a really great arc two. I hope you're ready for the ride!

This chapter was really heavy on the Healing and I hope nobody minded. I just wanted to remind everyone where we are. We're in a medical dramedy. There was lots of drama and comedy, but I wanted to bring back ALL three of those things. Harry needed to be back in the theatre more than he realized. He was stressed and freaking out and he needed to put his hands in a body, so Tom made that happen.

Also, I hope I've clarified Hermione's actions that the end of the last chapter. About how she's putting herself and her gifts before a man or a love life. I also hope you understand that Ron understands who she is as a person--which means he understands that she's kinda a fucking arsehole, but so is he, so yeah.

There will be growth on everyone's part (Even Draco, what an arsehole lol). Promise

Until next time! :D

EDIT:

Yaa Sang - http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/76674556434/spell-name-the-yaa-sang-incantation-yaa-sang

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, *why* don’t you want to assist on Riddle’s project again?” Neville asked, unsure as Harry morosely buttered his slightly burnt toast.

“Because he’s afraid they’ll fuck,” Ron said around his mouth full of eggs.

Harry sneered, flipping the bird off at the man. He couldn’t really contest Ron’s words, though. He wasn’t exactly wrong.

“You’re a pig,” Hermione drawled. She turned to Harry. “So, you think he’s going to trip and *accidentally* end up balls deep inside of you?”

“Merlin, Hermione,” Neville squeaked, shaking his head.

Harry was still choking over his shitty eggs. Ron thumped him on the back and Harry regurgitated congealed eggs back onto his plate. Hermione’s nose wrinkled.

"I didn't...that's not…" Harry trailed off. "Well, yes."

“What you’re really worried about is that you’re gonna fuck him again. Just admit it,” Ron said and he took a swig of orange juice to hide his self-satisfied smile.

“I’d rather sit on a knife than sit on Tom’s dick again. You can quote me on that,” Harry snarled back.

Hermione’s nose wrinkled. “Now, you’re just lying.”

Harry’s head fell onto the kitchen table with a thump. “I *am*. Merlin, he’s brilliant, isn’t he? It’s just so...*hot*," Harry groaned. Neville's cheeks were still pink, and Harry really didn't understand how the other man wasn't used to their vulgarity by now, especially when Neville himself said some fucked up shit at the most inopportune moments. "And he promised me that we'd make medical history. Do you know what it would be like? To be *published*? To do something that my mum could never *do*?”

"Yes, I can imagine how that would be pretty amazing for you with your colossal inferiority complex," Neville said. "So, just...get over yourself and do it."

“Neville!” Ron barked. “Keep up! Harry can’t do it because he’s going to fuck Riddle again and lose any shred of dignity that he still possesses.”

“Merlin! Piss off, Ron!” Harry snarled.

Ron grinned, glancing at Hermione, as if for approval. She was laughing into her tea and didn't seem to notice the redheaded man watching her.

“How long do you think he’ll wait for your answer?” Neville asked.

“It’s been a week. Tom isn’t a patient man,” Harry sighed.

"Yeah, because he's a fuckboy," Ron said, helpfully.

Harry flipped him the bird.

"If you're going to do this, just come up with rules," Hermione said, buttering her toast with more gusto than necessary. Harry glanced at Ron. He looked fascinated, and Hermione was dipping her head the way she did when she was embarrassed.

They were fucking nerds. Fucking nerds in love.

“Rules?” Ron asked, intrigued.

"Rules for himself and rules for Riddle. So that they don't go back to...whatever they were before," Hermione said. She took a deep bite into her toast and stared over her plate at Harry, a single eyebrow raised.

“You can call him my boyfriend. He was my boyfriend,” Harry sighed.

“Using the word ‘boyfriend’ for Riddle is so *weird*,” Neville said.

Ron grunted in agreement.

“But, rules. What kind of rules?” Harry asked.

“One: don’t let him get you drunk and alone. Two: Don’t let him come here. And three: Don’t be his friend,” Hermione said.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Hermione toasted her teacup to him. "You're going to end up in his bed and then, what will you do with yourself? Cry about it? You'll have been an equal participant. And you'll still be in love with him even though he chose his career over you. You'll be just another sorry notch in his bedpost. You'll be the ex that he thinks he can have under him whenever he bats his eyelashes, and that's not a good look. Now, you know your rules?"

Harry swallowed the last of his tea. “I know the rules.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry was staring down at his charts when he felt an overbearing, arrogant presence. He snorted, looking up, expecting Tom *again*. Since their Yaa Sang procedure a week ago, the man had been so annoying, always prodding and poking and wondering about Harry's answer. He frowned when a man he *wasn't* expecting smirked at him, roguish in a charming sort of way.

“Hello. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting just yet,” Rodolphus Lestrange purred.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I know who you are," he said as he continued to organize the parchment files in a way that *wouldn't* irritate McGonagall.

“You know, I haven’t even been away from London very long, and I’m already confounded by all of the rain. It makes me want to stay in bed all day,” Rodolphus murmured.

Harry snorted. “You’re not very subtle,” he retorted.

"Subtlety has never been my strong suit," Rodolphus said, following after him. He leaned down into Harry’s personal space again. “You ever go out with coworkers?”

“Okay. Let’s do this,” Harry sighed, pulling his wand and turning on Rodolphus. Rodolphus jerked back, eyes wide. "Listen, Rodolphus, I’m not interested in your games, okay? I’m just not. You and Bellatrix and Tom are...you need to work out your shit, but don’t try to involve me. I’m not doing it.”

Rodolphus stared at Harry in wonder. Harry’s eyes narrowed, wondering what was going through the irritating man’s tiny brain.

“I can see why he finds you attractive,” Rodolphus said, unraveling and he leaned back, all of that smoldering attractiveness gone in a second. “I’m not actually attracted to men, by the way. I just wanted to see what you’d do.”

“You’re a child,” Harry retorted.

Rodolphus shrugged. “I just wanted to meet the other dirty mistress in this tawdry love affair,” Rodolphus admitted and Harry had to stop himself from smiling. "You know Albus says that behind this rugged, confident exterior, I’m self-destructive and self-loathing to an almost pathological degree.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “Oh, so we *do* have a lot in common,” he said with a grin. This felt a lot like flirting. Harry had to stop that. Flirting with strange older men.

“You know what’s funny, Tom caught me in his bed with his fiance, with me quite literally *balls deep* inside of her, and he walked away. I *mentioned* you when I came back to work and he laid me out on the floor. Just food for thought.”

Harry’s cheeks burned. Rodolphus took another step forward.

“Harry!”

Harry felt relief flood through his body and he turned away from Rodolphus, grinning at the young woman that limped down the hall.

“Lavender! Where’s your cane?” Harry chastised as he walked up to meet her.

Lavender’s nose wrinkled. “I’m not an old man. I'm not *Dad*,” she said. She flounced her hair —it was shorter, the blood-stained ends clipped away—and smiled sweetly. “And it doesn’t match my outfit.”

"You're going to strain something," Harry said, ushering her away without another glance backward. Lavender looked up at him, curious.

“Who was that? And why is *he* glaring at him?” Lavender asked. Harry frowned and followed Lavender’s stare. He winced when he looked down the hall at Tom. The man’s eyes were narrowed on Rodolphus, burning with fury.

“It’s a long story,” Harry said.

“Well, I’m a patient and you’re a Healer. And I require your time,” Lavender said regally as he led her back to the physical therapy corridor around the corner. He escorted her back into her room and she sat down on the too soft sofa.

“Well, alright,” Harry hesitated. “I don’t know how much I should tell you.”

“I’ve washed cum out of your hair.”

Harry winced. Another reminder of one of his finest moments.

“Right. Well. That was Rodolphus Lestrange,” Harry sighed.

“That means nothing to me,” Lavender deadpanned.

Harry glared. “I’m getting there!” he snapped. “Anyway, Rodolphus Lestrange is Tom Riddle’s ex-best friend. Tom Riddle was the man—”

“Oh, I *know* who he is. He’s *handsome*,” Lavender said with a grin, fanning herself.

Harry’s expression soured.

“Yes, he’s very handsome.”

Lavender snorted. “Do you not like me saying that? Do you fancy him, Harry?” Lavender demanded.

“Been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt,” Harry retorted. Lavender squealed and Harry cringed from the noise. “Tom is...we were together. For a time. And then I found out he had an ex-fiance and it became this whole thing, and Rodolphus slept with that ex-fiance on top of

Tom's desk and Hermione tried to sell Ron and Neville fancies me but is dating Hannah Abbott and Bellatrix is a cunt and Draco is a fucking *pain* in my *arse* and it's just…"

Lavender's eyes had steadily widened as Harry tried to explain his way through the drama that had erupted at St. Mungo's since his arrival.

Lavender held up her hand, silencing him.

"Okay. Maybe start at the beginning," Lavender.

Harry sighed, ruffled. "Yeah. The beginning. Okay, it started the night before my first day when I was just the boy at the bar and Tom...he was just the *guy* at the *bar*—"

DIAGNOSIS

"Thanks...for having lunch with me."

"Yeah. Of course."

Harry stared at his mother for a long minute. He'd had exactly three words to say to her, and then, nothing else. His mind was totally blank and Lily was watching him expectantly. She lowered her spoon into her soup and slurped it off her spoon without ever breaking eye contact with him. Her eyes were terrifying, and it suddenly Harry was reminded that he had her eyes.

Were his eyes as terribly intrusive as hers?

Harry glanced over at his friends from the corner of his eye. Ron, Neville, and Hermione were all crammed at a table with Smith, Patil, Abbott, and the Frenchmen. They weren't being very low—it looked like they had picked that table to have the best view of Harry and Lily.

Fucking nosy bitches.

"So...Lavender's physical therapy is going well," Lily said.

Harry stopped himself from letting out a sound of relief. Lavender was a good conversation topic. They had her in common.

"That's good. How's her therapy with Dumbledore?" Harry asked eagerly.

Lily faltered. "That's...well that's patient-Healer confidentiality, but I assume...well?"

She fell silent.

Well. Then. Okay.

“I suppose you’ve been around long enough to hear that I’m a whore,” Harry blurted out. And then, he blushed a deep red. He *never* blushed. “Oh…my…God. I can’t believe I just said that to my *mother.* What the fuck is *wrong* with me?”

Lily snorted into her soup.

“I...heard some complaints. Because you were sleeping with Riddle,” Lily said calmly.

“He was my *boyfriend*. We weren’t just...you have questions?” Harry asked softly.

Lily pursed her lips. “I seem to remember you telling me that I wasn’t allowed to ask about him. I have refrained from doing so. Is that particular embargo lifted?” she asked, and Harry wasn’t sure how she was able to communicate so much pettiness in so few words, but it was a skill that he *wanted*.

“I...three questions,” Harry decided.

“How did it start?” Lily asked.

“I got drunk before my first day. Found him in a bar. Took him home. *Surprise:* he’s my boss,” Harry said, flatly. Lily opened her mouth and then seemed to think better about her question.

“And you love him?” she asked.

"I do." Harry didn't hesitate with that answer.

Lily sighed. “Does he love you, Harry-love?” she murmured.

“Not enough,” Harry said, his voice cold. “Now, let’s move on to a conversation topic that won’t have me either in a fit of rage or a fit of tears in the cafeteria. Can we agree on that?”

“Yes,” Lily said clinically and she leaned back, cracking her knuckles. “Tomorrow is a big day.”

“It is,” Harry said.

Tomorrow was his declaration day.

“I suppose your specialty isn’t even a real question,” Lily said with a tiny smile. Harry looked at her in surprise. “Draco, Astoria, and I saw your Yaa Sang procedure. Stunning work.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, his voice soft.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything like it in my life. Your instincts are off the charts. Technique is a little sloppy, but that’s the point of a teaching programme. Technique can be taught. Raw talent, not so much,” Lily said.

And Harry swallowed as a lump formed in his throat. Lily sounded as detached as she always did, cool and collected, but he could hear the intent in her voice. She meant every word. She thought that he was *talented*. She thought that he was *great*, and it made his heart triple in his size. The twisty darkness inside of him melted away just the tiniest bit.

“I think Draco might have a little crush on you, to be honest,” Lily continued.

Harry’s happiness fell away and he sneered, glancing over at the Frenchman. Draco looked caught and he immediately turned to Astoria and began to babble in French.

“Ugh. Gross. I’d rather fuck a mountain troll.”

And then, Lily did something that Harry hadn’t seen her do in reaction to him in a long time —she laughed.

DIAGNOSIS

Neville always felt most at home kneeling in a patch of dirt with a pair of dragonhide gloves on his hands.

The St. Mungo’s greenhouses were lush and large. It felt nearly as much like home as his garden back at the Longbottom Estate or behind his mum and dad’s house. Neville had just started nursing a little magical garden in the backyard of Grimmauld Place, and it was flourishing as best as it could with so little room. But, here, in the St. Mungo's one of four greenhouses, Neville felt amazing.

He smiled to himself as he harvested sage and turmeric and calendula. All Muggle plants, which a lot of trainees and Healers discounted, but Neville knew better. He knew that even the Muggles had figure out some of the magical purposes of the herbs and had learned to harness it themselves. The door swung open and Healer Sprout looked up from her desk.

“There’s been a request,” Snape said, snarkily. Sprout looked unimpressed. Neville looked and his mouth dropped open as Lily Evans herself danced in after Snape. He was surprised to see that she was just a tad taller than Snape.

“It’s really a request, Pomona,” Lily said, pleasant even though she sounded so chilly that Neville wanted to shiver.

“*You’re* the one that wants your daughter’s potion base to have *Puffapods* in them,” Snape sneered.

Lily scoffed, crossing her arms. “She’s a growing girl.”

“She’s nearly grown,” Snape returned.

“Really, Pomona, please. She’s allergic to Flobberworm mucus,” Lily said gently.

Pomona's eyes softened. "Neville. Harvest a few Puffapod beans for Healer Evans."

"Anything for Harry's sister," Neville said immediately, and he was shocked when Lily beamed at him. Snape sneered, but that moment would never be taken away from him. Lily Evans had grinned at *him*.

Neville moved further down the greenhouse, away from the non-magical herbs to the magical plants. Snape and Lily followed him, bickering quietly amongst themselves.

"They're not ready," Lily was saying.

"I think that I'll decide—" Snape began pompously.

"I may be on leave, but I still know them better than you," Lily warned.

She sighed to herself, looking exhausted, and Neville couldn't quite imagine the pressure it must be to be Lily Evans. Her daughter was still healing from a massive trauma, her husband too, and she was attempting to mend her broken relationship with her son. Neville winced as he thought about the terribly awkward lunch that she had had with Harry. Harry had looked pained until the tail end of it after Lily had burst into a fit of laughter that had silenced nearly the entire cafeteria.

"I'm their teacher now," Snape said, and he sounded gentle. It was so strange.

He *never* sounded like that. Neville now understood why Harry always made jokes about how into Lily, Snape was. Neville shuddered.

He waved his wand, summoning a few glass jars. He knelt in front of the Puffapod bush. Pink seed-pods, the size of fists, bounced gently in the artificial wind that blew from the old rickety wood fans hanging above. Neville drew forth his wand. He knew he couldn't touch them once he cracked the seed-pods open—it was one of the first lessons he'd learned as a budding Herbologist. Puffabod beans weren't meant to be touched by hands or gloves either. The moment the beans inside touched something solid other than the seedpod, it would flower.

"You don't know them like I do," Lily said firmly. "Draco is acting out because of the change."

"You speak of him as if he were a child," Snape retorted.

"Snape, they're *all* children. Every last one of them," Lily snapped.

Neville pretended not to be affronted by the fact that he was being called a *child*. He was a grown man. He paid *bills*—well, really, he paid for the takeaway when it was his nights and groceries and Herbology supplies, but he still paid for them with his own meager salary, thank you very fucking much. Neville began to pluck a rather large seed-pod off the bush and stood, bringing it over to a harvesting desk.

Still Lily and Snape followed.

“And Astoria? She’s doing rather remarkably, isn’t she?” Snape asked.

“Well, she doesn’t have any friends here. She had a lot of friends in France,” Lily defended.

Snape sneered. “And you had many friends as a young woman Healer in a field dominated by men?”

“My ability to make friends didn’t have to do with the fact that I was just a woman. I just can’t make friends with anyone who isn’t an arse,” Lily sniped.

Snape's gaze softened. "You're also socially-inept."

"Touché."

Neville rapped a large seed-pod again the side of the wood and watched it neatly crack in half. Neville sighed as he got to work. This was like child’s play really. It was the type of mindless work that made Neville wonder why he wasn’t a Herbology professor until he remembered that this Puffapod was going to ease someone’s life or the fact that the herb and plant concoction that he had cooked up for Lavender had sustained her while she had waited for her procedure. Herbology professors didn’t get to ease someone’s pain.

Healers did.

Neville peered into the seed-pod and sighed in relief. Hundreds of little silver beans lined the leathery inside. SIlver beans were always the most versatile and reacted the least with potion ingredients. A much better stabilizer than Flobberworm mucus, in Neville’s opinion, but expensive. Lily and James could certainly afford it.

“*Mininium*,” Neville cast over the rather large glass jar. The electric charge burst through immediately. It was a spell meant to make the beans cluster towards each other rather than against the glass of the jar. Then, he waved his wand again, Conjuring water and squirting it into the jar, to trick the seed-pods into believing that they were still in the seed-pod.

He took great care to harvest, using the Levitating Charm to lift three dozen of the silvery beans into the jar. Lily and Snape were still arguing about the Frenchmen, as Harry called them.

“What do you think, Mr. Longbottom?”

If Neville was any less experienced, he would’ve ruined it all and dropped the seeds. Instead, he only jumped and turned to look at Lily, not even looking anymore as he harvested the seeds. He’d done it dozens of times before, it was easy as breathing.

“J-just Neville.”

“Okay. What do you think?” Lily demanded.

“I don’t know...what...I…” Neville stammered.

Snape groaned. “Really? You’ll ask Longbottom? He’s barely passable as—”

“Shut up. I’m asking my son’s friend. He’s harvesting Puffapod seeds without even watching what he’s doing. Clearly, he’s more than passable,” Lily snapped. Her gaze didn’t soften but her voice did. “How are my students, Neville? Do they fit in well amongst their fellow trainees?”

Neville opened his mouth and the closed it. His cheeks turned pink.

“I’m not sure if I’m the best person to answer that,” Neville mumbled.

“See the boy admits it!” Snape snapped. “Do you doubt my skills as a teacher?”

“You’ve been teaching them for all of two weeks, Severus. Get a grip,” Lily griped before she turned back to Neville. “I think you *are* the best person. Please. Be honest.”

“Well…” Neville said. He swallowed his nerves and bulldozed on. Really, Lily was just an older and much scarier version of Harry. He could do this. “Draco is an antagonistic prick and Astoria’s kind of terrifying and condescending. They’ve made friends with Zacharias Smith who is an unlikable douchebag, so no one is really hanging out with them very often. Harry pretty much hates Draco, and Draco doesn’t help by baiting him all of the time. They’re rude to Hermione and talk behind some of the Healers’ backs and it’s just kinda...unflattering…”

Neville trailed off. He turned his gaze back to his task, quivering under Lily's unwavering gaze. He put the top on the unbreakable jar and then turned back to Snape, solemnly offering the jar to the Potions Master. Snape snatched it from him, irritated. Lily's expression was changing too fast for Neville to read and then it settled into something expressly unimpressed.

“I was right. They’re not ready,” Lily said coldly.

“Ready for what, ma’am?” Neville asked. He winced when Lily raised an eyebrow.

“ ‘Ma’am’. Merlin, Severus, am I really that old?” Lily asked.

“Wait! I mean, I just, you’re Lily Evans,” Neville blurted out. “Greatest Healer, like, ever, and one of my best friend’s...mum.”

Lily snorted. She nodded. “Thank you for the Puffapod seeds, Neville Longbottom. Thanks for letting me borrow him, Pomona,” Lily said. Sprout barely looked up from where she was nearly buried in the dirt next to the mandrakes. Lily glanced at Neville. “They’re not ready to announce their specialty. We’ll try it again in a few months. Thanks for letting me know about this, Neville. Good luck to you tomorrow.”

She swept from the greenhouse without another word, Snape sneering and snapping at her heels.

Neville couldn’t keep his tiny smile off his face.

Served Draco right for being an arse. He got what was coming to him.

Maybe he'd learn that Healing was a *team* sport.

Neville let out a sigh. Lily Evans—one of the best Healers alive—had just wished him luck.

The only thing that would've been better would be if Phyllida Spore, the author of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*, had done the same.

DIAGNOSIS

D-Day. Friday. The big day. The day they'd been waiting for what felt like their whole lives.

Harry took a deep breath.

Time to get real.

Neville, Hermione, and Harry waited by the door, straining hard to listen through the wards that Dumbledore had put up had to be *strong*. Smith and Patil were already preening—Smith declaring as a Spell Damage specialist, though that would surely change, and Patil as a Magical Bugs and Diseases specialist. Abbott was nervous, reviewing her own charts in her head. She was probably wondering if she was going to be the trainee dismissed from the program.

Harry hoped she wouldn't be, for Neville's sake.

The door creaked open and Hermione straightened.

"Well?" Hermione demanded. Ron looked down at her impassively and Hermione made a wounded sound.

"Mate, that's impossible," Harry breathed, his eyes wide.

"No...it can't be *you*. That's statistically impossible! It should be Abbott or Turpin or Entwhistle. I did the maths!"

"Oi, that's my girlfriend you're talking about," Neville interjected.

Hermione ignored him, her brow furrowed as she went over the maths again. "Ron, we'll fix this! I'll talk to Vance or-or, I'll even beg Healer Evans, I—"

"Relax, hag. I'm in," Ron said, his lips curling into a wide grin.

Hermione's jaw dropped and then she shoved Ron roughly as he broke into vicious cackles.

"You irritating piece of shit!"

“I didn’t know you cared,” Ron said, trembling with his laughter. Harry relaxed and shook his head.

“You’re a right prat for that. Now, go on. Your specialty?” Harry demanded.

“Emergency & Triage. Guess who my teacher is?” Ron asked, raising an eyebrow. “Give you a hint. It rhymes with your ex’s ex.”

“Fucking Bellatrix,” Harry groaned.

“She’s a nutter, but she’s bloody brilliant,” Ron said. He looked over at the door. “Entwhistle is almost done. Then, it’s Abbott, I think.”

Hannah jumped at the sound of her name, and then she was muttering under her breath again, pacing. The door slammed open and everyone looked wide-eyed. Entwhistle looked ashen and Turpin rushed up to her teammate.

“What is it?” she demanded.

“Dumbledore asked me to leave,” Entwhistle said quietly.

There was a long moment of solemnity. They all remembered Dumbledore’s words from their first day—two of them would be asked to leave. Some of them would crack under the pressure. Some of them would switch to easier fields. Finally, everything seemed more real.

Harry’s stomach turned.

“No…” Cornfoot was saying. “That can’t be true.”

“It is. Apparently, my potions skills lab pushed me over the edge,” Entwhistle said sharply. His nose wrinkled, and he turned to Hannah. "You're up."

Hannah let out a half-sob before she spun. Neville reached out, grabbing her by the wrist to calm her down. He leaned forward to whisper something in her ear. As he murmured to her, Entwhistle stormed out, his trainee group following after him like lost ducks. Hannah staggered away from Neville and Dumbledore’s door shut softly behind her.

Harry was lost in his own head.

Harry had caused so many issues from day one. He had been the subject of gossip and the target of vitriol. The party, the rule-breaking, *Tom*. It would probably be better if Dumbledore got rid of him, if he were being honest. Truly, Harry sometimes felt like he was still a little kid, eager to prove himself. He wasn't a Healer. Not really. He was—

“Stop it,” Hermione hissed in his ear.

Harry looked at her, wide-eyed. “What?”

“Your imposter syndrome is showing,” Hermione said snippily.

"Is that, that thing where you think that you don't deserve what you've got because you can't comprehend your own accomplishments?" Ron asked. He tilted his head. "You do know you're brilliant, right, mate?"

“Yes, I know,” Harry snapped. He sounded like he was lying through his teeth.

“Do you?” Hermione challenged.

Harry opened his mouth to argue and Hermione silenced him with a look. Harry knew what that meant.

Shake it off.

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed, finally meaning what he said. “Just a momentary crisis. I’m fine. I’m *fine.*”

“Really, Harry, you get yourself worked up over the oddest things. Dumbledore would be bloody mad to fire you,” Ron said encouragingly. He tilted his head and his brow furrowed. “I wonder what Bellatrix is going to be like as a teacher.”

“Awful,” Harry remarked immediately. Then, he hesitated, shaking his head. “Actually, she’s a great teacher. I learned a lot on her service. What made you pick E&T?”

“I saved your father, that’s what,” Ron said. “It was a rush, wasn’t it? I just...everything was like a game. Like a chess game. I’m bloody good at chess, I don’t know if you know.”

“I know,” Hermione ground out.

Harry grinned. Hermione had won exactly one game out of the hundreds that they had played.

“It’s pretty great. Better than Spell Damage. We all know that’s *your* specialty, Harry,” Ron said.

As Ron spoke, the door cracked open. Hannah looked in near tears, but she was smiling. Harry wasn’t sure who reached her first—Patil or Neville. They stood on either side of her, staring down at her.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Neville asked.

“Not you too, right? It can’t be,” Padma said, speaking over him.

"Not me," Hannah gasped in relief. Both sighed in relief. Even, Smith looked like he was relaxing, and Harry hadn't even realized how tense the man was until that tension had drained away. "He said...it was really close. Too close. I just have to do better. I declared Magical Bugs and Maladies, focusing on children. I'm working with Lovegood, probably. She's being sent the paperwork now."

Neville ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, good. Lovegood is a bit…”

“Loony,” Ron supplied, unhelpfully.

“Sure,” Neville said with a warning in his eyes. “But, she’s great. Honest.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Hannah said, nodding. “Fuck, I can’t believe it was so close. I have to do better.”

She sounded determined now.

Harry’s anxiety returned and he glanced at Ron. Ron was watching him, utterly relaxed, and suddenly, Harry realized what the man had been doing before—carefully dismantling all of Harry’s doubts and worries.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a small smile.

“You’re, like, family, or whatever,” Ron grumbled though he was grinning despite himself.

“Family,” Hermione barked, aggressive as ever.

Harry snorted into his hand and smothered his grin with his hand.

“Anyway, you’re the last one, Potter. Go forth,” Hannah said with a smile.

And Harry *was* the last one. Hermione had been easy. Creature-Induced Injuries, and Emmeline Vance as her mentor. Apparently, Hermione hadn’t even had to *ask.* Emmeline had already put the paperwork through to take her on at the soonest possible moment. Neville was Potions and Plant Poisoning, and shockingly and not shockingly, had chosen Pomona Sprout as his mentor. Clearly, his time with Snape hadn’t made him any fonder of the arsehole.

“Go forth and receive your destiny,” Neville said with a grin.

Harry flipped him off.

“We all know what he’s going to choose,” Smith said, obnoxious as ever. Before Harry could respond, he was already turning back to his team. “Wonder if Riddle will have time for him now that he’s got that grant. Doubt it. My grandmother—Hepzibah Smith, you know, she’s a donor—offered a small incentive to have Riddle train me, but he said he was too busy.”

“Well, I mean, your grandmother is just a donor, and his mother is *Lily Evans*, and after all, he’s...I hate to admit it, but probably going to be one of the best—” Padma was saying and then, the door shut behind Harry, and he was alone with the Head Healer of St. Mungo’s.

“Come, my boy, come. Sit down,” Albus Dumbledore said with a small smile. He pushed his half-moon glasses up his crooked nose, his bright blue eyes flickering knowingly behind the frames.

“Hello, Healer Dumbledore,” Harry said softly as he did as he was commanded.

He settled in the chair across from the man. Harry was sitting in the chair that his mother had sat in when she had declared her specialty—an unprecedented Spell Damage and Plants &

Poisonings. Snape had declared his specialty in that chair. Vance. Lovegood. Bellatrix. Lestrange.

Tom.

“I must confess, Harry, that I have been waiting for this moment,” Albus said, almost apologetically.

“Really?” Harry asked, quietly. “Why?”

"You remind me of two former trainees that sat in that chair. Two talented trainees with bright futures and a choice," Albus said.

“A choice,” Harry repeated.

“Of course, I speak of your mother and young Tom Riddle. They both had choices, and they made their choices. They weren’t the wrong choices, but they weren’t the best, either. What will you choose?” Albus asked.

Dumbledore was speaking in circles and Harry wasn’t sure what his choices were at all. All he could think was that he was being dropped from the program.

“Are you firing me?” Harry whispered.

“Absolutely not,” Albus said immediately. And then, he tilted his head. “Unless you want me to.”

“Never,” Harry confessed.

Albus’ eyes brightened and he leaned forward. “Harry, why do you want to be a Healer?”

“I want to help people. I want to help people that were never helped. I want to change the world. I want to be great.”

“And if you’re never great?” Dumbledore challenged, just as fast. HIs smile disappeared. “If you’re never recognized for all of your accomplishments?”

Harry was at a loss.

That had never been a question for him. He'd been called brilliant from the moment that he had appeared at St. Mungo's. He was good at what he did. He had good instincts, and he loved his work. If he wasn't great, what was he, other than just another Healer who loved their job? Just another Healer who opened people up and took the bad things out and—

He *took the bad* things out.

“Then, I’m not great,” Harry said with a small smile. “But, I still beat death back and gave someone another day. I still changed someone’s life. I still *saved* someone. And I will never be satisfied. I’m going to change the world, and if no one ever knows it...well, *I* know it.”

And Dumbledore's lips curled into a bright grin. "Congratulations on your specialty, Healer Potter."

Harry beamed. "I haven't even declared it."

"Spell Damage. Trained by Tom Marvolo Riddle," Dumbledore said. He spun the file in front of him around and Harry peered down at the flourishing signature that he could just make out to read Tom's name. "Already approved."

"Okay," Harry laughed, throwing his head back. He stood up and Dumbledore did the same. Dumbledore reached forward, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"That was the better choice," Dumbledore said softly. "I have confidence in you, Healer Potter. You'll blow us all away if you're given the chance. You and your merry band of friends."

"My family," Harry corrected gently.

Dumbledore looked wistful. "You four remind me so much of them."

"Who?" Harry asked softly.

"One day, my boy, ask Tom about his own family. And ask him why he hasn't forgiven them for their mistakes. If the answer is pride, bully him out of that," Dumbledore commanded.

Harry snorted in laughter. "I don't think *anyone* can bully Tom Riddle."

"Then, love him despite it," Dumbledore said.

Harry's laughter cut out. "Healer…"

"I do not think...I should be asking this of you, but I can't *not* ask you. Tom Riddle loved his family and they hurt him. I've known him since he was a child, Harry. And they were all he had. Show him how important they are, even in all of their mistakes. Be his family and remind him of his own."

Harry's gaze softened.

"Okay, Healer. Okay."

Harry backed away from the man, not quite taking his eyes off of Dumbledore until he got to the door. He opened the door and then turned around. The room was silent, and the group of trainees that remained was torn between watching Harry and the other man that stood against the wall opposite Harry.

"And?" Tom Riddle asked.

"Hello, teacher," Harry said with a wry smile. He took a step forward, ignoring Neville, Ron, and Hermione's quiet hisses of approval. "Ask me again."

“Ask you again?” Tom asked with a smirk on his handsome face. “What makes you think I haven’t changed my mind? Maybe I want to ask Smart, or Schmitt, or Smith, or whatever.”

Smith squawked in irritation.

Harry took another step forward. “Because you want the best. Ask me again.”

“Assist me on my project?” Tom asked.

"Why?" Harry challenged with a grin, practically vibrating with excitement.

“Thought you’d want to save some lives. Change the world and that rot,” Tom said casually.

Harry beamed. “Yeah, why not. It’s a beautiful day to conquer death. Let’s have some fun and shit.”

Tom barked out a laugh and then he started walking down the hallway.

Harry looked over at his family for just a moment. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Neville grinned and nodded. Ron gave him a thumbs up. Hermione looked at him expectantly.

Harry pounded down the hallway after the taller man, falling into step with him.

“Alright, Tom. You’ve got me on your project. Let’s get down to the details.”

DIAGNOSIS

Bellatrix watched them go, heads bent close together. Tom was walking nearly sideways for Merlin’s sake, his entire body angled towards the trainee that strutted out as if he didn’t realize how Tom trailed after him like a lost *dog*. It was actually rather embarrassing, Bellatrix thought. Tom had fallen so low, in her absence. She thought all of these things while her stomach turned with discomfort and nerves.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” he hissed in her ear.

Bellatrix didn’t jump. She had had Rodolphus’ whisper in her ear for a long time before they had both fucked off to wallow in self-pity.

“What?” she snapped.

“He never looked at you like that, did he? Like he’d follow you anywhere,” Rodolphus taunted and Bellatrix’s hands clenched into tight fists as she refused to look at him. She only watched the pair of them. They had stopped by the corridor entrance towards the Apparition Zone. “He’s in love with him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bellatrix snarled, snapping her head back to look at him—*finally*. “He can’t have him.”

Bellatrix cursed under her breath. She had given a little too much away.

“Oh, really?” Rodolphus murmured. “Was that the stipulation for his little grant? He can have his name in medical history, but he can’t have the boy? How delightfully *petty* of you, Bella.”

“What do you even want?” Bellatrix demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. She wasn’t sure if she was holding herself together or defending herself from Rodolphus’ pointed words, so easy to dig into her soft bits.

“I’m just making conversation, Bella,” Rodolphus muttered. “Do you think he’s really going to come crawling back to you, Bella? We’ve known Tom for a long time—since we were kids. You think he’s going to leave *him*?”

Bellatrix snarled. “I *think* you’re a fucking coward. Spit it out. Why did you really come back?” Bellatrix demanded.

“You know why,” Rodolphus retorted immediately. “I told you why.”

“My answer hasn’t changed. I don’t love you,” Bellatrix said flatly.

Rodolphus snorted, shaking his head. “Fine. Go on loving the man that can *never* love you. That won’t *ever* love you.”

“Coward,” she spat again, her voice cracking on the world.

Her eyes burned and she stared at him for a long time as she remembered the last words he had spoken to her. She had shown up in his flat, sobbing so hard that her entire body had trembled. He had held her while she had stumbled through the story, how Tom had burned all of her clothing, had Banished her key to the flat, had *thrown* her out of their home. It had taken him three days after catching them to do that. She had thought they would get past that.

Bellatrix had told him that she was going to give him time.

And she remembered Rodolphus’ last words: *I will love you until the end of time.*

She had flinched away from those terrible words and run away. He didn’t know that she’d come back the next day, looking for him, and he had disappeared too.

“And my answer hasn’t changed either,” he said, softly.

Bellatrix shook her head and walked away.

So did Rodolphus.

DIAGNOSIS

“Hermione,” Ron said as the woman threw her bright green robes into her cupboard and prepared to make her way out of the building. Ron sighed as Hermione pretended she hadn’t heard him. He reached out, grabbing her wrist, and tugged her closer to his corner of the room. She looked at him, eyes wide like a spooked mooncalf. “Hermione, we need to talk.”

“Why can’t you let this go?” Hermione whispered, in a soft voice.

“Because I don’t want to and I don’t think you do either,” Ron retorted quietly. He glanced over his shoulder and was relieved to see Harry was already gone, probably running off with Riddle. “We need to talk about the—”

“*Ron*,” Hermione whispered, trembling. She glanced over his shoulder and pointed. “Emmeline is waiting for you.”

Ron glanced over his shoulder and cursed. Emmeline stood in the doorway, a strange expression on her face. She was already wearing her coat. He had forgotten. It was Friday, their pub day. They were going to try another new pub that they had found at the mouth of Knockturn Alley the last week. The night was going to be on Emmeline as congratulations. Emmeline wasn’t even quite looking at him. Her eyes were on Hermione.

Ron looked back down at Hermione.

She was strange to look at—big frizzy hair, wide eyes, heavy eyebrows, big teeth. And still, she was so stunning. Ron had dated a little bit at Hogwarts, and he wondered how he had never noticed the pretty brown-skinned bookworm tucked into the corner of the Ravenclaw table.

“You can’t keep running away,” Ron snapped.

“I’m not running,” Hermione retorted, and *there* she was. That fierce, brilliant woman that he admired so much. He tilted his head.

“You run into your own head. But, I’m not letting this one go,” Ron said sharply and he pulled away from her, grabbing his coat out of his cupboard and departing without another word.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief and she shook herself, gathering her wits about her. She hadn’t expected Ron to *confront* her. Somehow, in all of her calculations of how her actions would play out, she had never even considered Ron trying to talk to her about it. Ron liked to laugh shit off, and make jokes. If he was unamused, he’d explode like a child. And yet, he had tried to talk to her like an adult. She hadn’t expected that.

“What was that about?”

Hermione looked up at Neville, caught.

“It was...nothing,” Hermione whispered.

“Was it about Ron kissing you?” Neville asked, his gaze unwavering.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “How do you know about that?”

“You think Harry and you are the only two people in our house that gossip?” Neville countered, his eyebrows rising. His lips twisted into a smile as Hermione scowled at him, crossing her arms over her chest and she huffed.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Hermione snapped.

“Is this about Emmeline? How she…likes him, and you’re her student? Or about to be, rather?” Neville asked hesitantly.

Hermione was careful not to look at him. “No. Nothing like that,” she said, lying through her teeth.

Neville was quiet for a long moment as if he were weighing his words. He was rocking back and forth, tilting his head and then he finally turned back to her.

“I know I’m not Harry, and I don’t really...*get* you, like he does, but you know I love you, right?” Neville asked and Hermione looked up at him. Neville was smiling down at her, his eyes kind and soft.

Against her better judgment, Hermione’s lips curled into a tiny smile.

“I know. You know I love you too?” Hermione asked quietly.

Neville shrugged. “I had a tiny suspicion. Sometimes, it’s hard to tell because you’re a fucking psycho.”

Hermione threw her head back and laughed, long and loud and bright. She didn’t even care that others were watching the pair of them. She shook her head.

“Alright, smart arse. Let’s go take away. I’m feeling Indian.”

DIAGNOSIS

“I’m ready to get *drunk*,” Emmeline declared as they walked into The Fountain of Fair Fortune on Horizont Alley. It was a musty place that had surely seen better years, which only made it better for both Ron and Emmeline.

Emmeline got looks, as she tended to wherever she went. She was a fit woman, something that Ron really couldn’t forget. Not with her plump, always red lips, her curves, the way she laughed. So, yeah, she was fit, and sometimes, he wished that he could fancy her, the way he might’ve. But, then he remembered biting words and a pack of smokes and frizzy hair that always smelled like coconut and Indian take away and her *laugh* and her *snarls* and her

brilliance, and he remembered that though Emmeline was fit and funny and sweet, she was no Hermione Granger.

He winced.

“Same. I want to forget my name,” Ron said firmly.

Emmeline grinned at him. “That’s what I’m talking about,” she said as she settled at the end of the bar. The bartender looked up from where he was lazily dusting a bottle of Firewhiskey. He didn’t look like he should be out of Hogwarts yet.

Merlin, he still had *spots* on his cheeks.

"To start...just a pint of beer for me, and...what do you want, Em?” Ron asked.

“My treat, Ron,” Emmeline said. She leaned forward on her barstool, waving her hand, giving the bartender a line of sight into her cleavage. “Your finest bottle of Firewhiskey!”

“Really?” Ron asked, surprised.

Emmeline grimaced. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

"You weren't kidding about wanting to get drunk," Ron commented as the bartender waved his wand, sending their drinks flying down the bar. Ron caught both the pint and bottle and cursed when the pale amber of his beer slipped over the side, coating his hand.

Emmeline waved her wand, washing his hand free of the sticky foam and liquid.

“No, I was not,” Emmeline said and she tapped the top of the bottle and took a long pull.

Ron’s eyes widened more and more. He had only ever seen *Harry* drink Firewhiskey like it was water, and he and Neville had a hypothesis that Harry could only do it because his insides were made of dark twisty shit that allowed him to process it better than a normal person.

They nursed their drinks in relative silence. It was always a comfortable silence with Emmeline. They didn’t need to talk to fill the space between them with small talk. It was unnecessary. That was one thing that she had in common with Hermione.

Ron cursed into his half-finished pint.

He needed to stop. To stop thinking about...*her.*

Ron glanced at Emmeline. She was drinking twice as fast as him, and he wasn't sure if she'd even eaten lunch. Great.

“Can we get a basket of fish and chips?” Ron called.

“That’ll be twelve sickles,” the bartender said immediately.

Ron rolled his eyes and nodded and the bartender went into the backroom to get their food together.

“Fucking overpriced greasy pub food,” Ron muttered under his breath.

He knew he was probably going to get shitty food, but maybe, it’d soak up some of the alcohol. When the bartender came back with their food, he lifted the pitcher and topped off Ron’s beer for him and nodded at Emmeline.

“She alright?” the bartender asked. “She’s a third in and she’s drinking really fast.”

Emmeline was muttering to herself, her head bent over the mouth of the Firewhiskey bottle.

“Yeah. I think she’s just...having a bad day,” Ron said. He swallowed his nerves and turned fully to face his friends. “What is it, Em?”

“You know you deserve a nice girl, right, Ron?” Emmeline said. Her eyes were hazy with alcohol, but her voice was surprisingly clear, only a hint of a slur in her words.

“Um. Yes?” he said. He pushed the platter of fish and chips towards Emmeline.

She went for the fish first, as she always did. Emmeline washed it down with another gulp of Firewhiskey.

“You deserve someone kind and sweet and sweet—I’ve said that twice—and *good* and funny. A girl who likes shitty pubs and will eat the fish in the fish and chips and that is good at her job. A nice girl. You deserve a nice girl! Don't you want that?" Emmeline demanded and she sounded like she was pleading with him. Ron swallowed hard. He looked away and suddenly, he was reminded of that awfully telling look that Neville had given him.

I don’t think that she sees you as a friend, Ron, Neville’s voice echoed.

Ron reached for a chip.

“Hermione Granger is not *nice*.”

Ron dropped the chip back into the platter. He turned towards her and stared into her brandy eyes and nodded, slowly.

“No. She’s not,” he whispered.

“She is the exact opposite of everything I would’ve pictured for you. It would actually be funny if it wasn’t so...*not* funny,” Emmeline said, her voice shaking. Ron’s eyes widened and his hand reached out to tug the Firewhiskey from her hands. She snatched it away, taking a long burning sip. “I get it. She’s beautiful and talented and kinda amazing. And she’s right. I get her.”

“I think it’s time to get you home,” Ron said nervously, and this had never happened before.

Sure, Emmeline and he had gotten quite pissed before, and sometimes, it ended in a bit of snogging before Ron gathered the little sense that he had, but Emmeline had never ranted like that. Granted, Emmeline had always said that Firewhiskey was the worst for her, but he hadn't even thought that it would turn her into this. He hadn't thought it would push the conversation in the exact direction he didn't want it going in.

"I get her so *much*, Ron," Emmeline lamented, her head falling against the sticky, disgusting bar. She didn't even seem to mind it much, and Ron's nose wrinkled. "Her gift...herself...she chooses her gift, and she should because she's brilliant, Ron, and I understand why you're in love with her."

"Excuse me?" Ron squeaked out. "I'm not in love with—"

"But she was willing to *trade* you," Emmeline blurted out. And Ron's heart stopped.

"What?"

"She was willing to trade you for me. I was going to leave. After we saved Lily's kid. And she...she...she said if I stayed, I could *have* you," Emmeline said and she let out a terrible sob. "And I *agreed* to that."

Ron blinked once. Then twice. He closed his eyes and finally pulled the Firewhiskey out of Emmeline's grasp. He took a long drag from the bottle, using the burn to tether himself to the ground because he felt like he was floating. Then, he opened his eyes again and he looked down at Emmeline, brushing her mussed, falling curls from her face.

"Don't you hate me?" Emmeline wept through her drunken tears.

"No. I don't hate anyone," Ron said quietly. "Just. Get up."

He didn't wait for her to agree, only pulling her up to her feet. He reached into his pocket, tossing down a few too many Galleons. He looped an arm around Emmeline's waist and she stumbled, leaning against him heavily.

"Where are we going?" she asked drunkenly.

"I'm taking you home and then, I'm going home," Ron said calmly because he didn't know what else to be *but* calm.

"H-home? Back to her?" Emmeline sighed. She was soaking his shoulder in her tears and her lipstick was only a stain on her lips now.

And the idea struck his slightly drunken brain as a good one. He wondered what would happen if he showed up at Grimmauld Place. He wondered what would happen if he banged on Hermione's door and demanded an explanation. And maybe, that was something he would've done as a kid, but he wasn't a kid anymore. And Hermione...Hermione was a complicated woman, wasn't she?

Well, Ron had gotten that from the beginning.

She was willing to trade you for me.

And suddenly, he wanted nothing more than his mother's roast chicken and his father's terrible jokes and broken Muggle things. He wanted to sleep in his hideously orange childhood bedroom under the noisy ghoul and see his brothers and sister, who might even be home for the weekend from Hogwarts.

“No. Tomorrow’s my off day,” Ron said, biting his bottom lip raw. “I’m going *home*.”

DIAGNOSIS

Tom hesitated in front of the door of his flat. He glanced back over his shoulder at Harry. Harry stared back at him, raising a single eyebrow, his arms crossed over his chest.

“What?” Harry challenged. “I’ve seen your flat before, Tom.”

“Not...not like this. I haven’t...tidied up,” Tom began.

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “Did you just used the words ‘tidied up’?”

“You’re an irritating little shit,” Tom sighed, turning back to his door. He tapped the lock with the tip of his wand. The deadbolt clicked open and the heavy metal door slowly creaked inward. “Watch your step.”

“Watch my…” Harry trailed off.

His lips part and he took a deep inhale. The chrome coldness of the flat that Harry remembered was gone. It was still bright and a rather nice flat. But, now, it seemed lived in, in a way that Harry didn't quite remember. Parchment covered every available surface. Tom's handwriting was scrawled across napkins and in the margins of old Daily Prophets and on the Post-its on his fridge. Piles of research were scattered across the floor, from scrolls to old case files to books. Countless books. Every meter or so, there was a purposefully bare spot, as if Tom had made himself a *pathway*.

“I’ve been...preoccupied,” Tom allowed, his voice cool as he looked away.

Harry’s lips curled into a wide smile. “You think?” he teased softly. Tom looked at him, surprised. “This is brilliant. Tell me about the project, yeah?”

Tom’s burgundy eyes lit up and nodded, using the bare spots on the floor to make his way to the couch. He cleared it off, dumping the piles on the short coffee table, making a space for Harry. Harry followed his footsteps, though he had to jump from spot to spot. It was clearly a path made more for Tom's abnormally, freakishly long legs. Harry curled up against the sofa.

“Okay,” Tom said and he was grinning, like a boy. “I’m going to conquer death.”

“As you’ve said,” Harry said firmly. “How are you going to go about that?”

“I have an idea. A hypothesis, if you will. How much do you know about Dark magic?” Tom asked.

“I know that it’s the antithesis of Healing magic,” Harry retorted.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Is it?”

“Yes,” Harry said immediately. “Absolutely.”

“Really, you mustn’t be afraid to dream a little bigger, sweetheart,” Tom said, staring at him with that arrogance that both irritated Harry and made him laugh.

“Oh, fuck off. If we’re going to work together, we need rules,” Harry said, shoving his shoulder.

Tom snorted.

“Rules?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, um, rules,” Harry stammered, tripping over his words. Tom raised a single eyebrow, unimpressed. “We need boundaries. You can’t...we can’t drink together. You can’t come to Grimmauld Place. And...and Hermione said we can't be friends, but I...well, I wanna be friends. So, yeah. We're going to go back to being *just* friends.”

“Where we ever?” Tom asked, his voice suddenly soft as he looked up at Harry from underneath his long, *long* eyelashes. He leaned forward, his eyes darting down to Harry’s lips and then back up again.

Harry’s voice caught in his throat. “No,” he whispered.

“Sweetheart—” Tom began.

“*No,* Tom. You...you chose the grant. You didn’t choose me. So, no. We’re going to be *friends*,” Harry snapped and Tom looked at him for a long moment. He watched the burgundy glint to Tom’s eyes flicker, and slowly Tom leaned back, impressed.

“Fine. Friends, then,” Tom decided, respect in his eyes.

“Now, tell me what this is about,” Harry commanded loftily.

Tom's lips curled into a small smile. He looked young, like a boy caught doing something he really shouldn't be. It was frightfully charming, and Harry suddenly remembered why he had fallen in love with this man in the first fucking place. It did things to Harry—made his heart flutter like he was a fucking teen-aged girl. He paused. He couldn't ever imagine *Hermione’s* heart fluttering about, and she had been a teen-aged girl.

Fine, then. His heart fluttered like a prepubescent youth with his first crush.

“I had quite a fascination with Dark magic in my youth. It is a powerful branch of magic with great capability of destruction and innovation. When I became a Healer, I wanted to explore avenues of applying the principles and perhaps even magic of the Dark arts to the art of Healing,” Tom explained. He leaned forward.

“Using Dark magic to Heal?” Harry asked uncertainly. “How?”

"There are so many branches of the Dark Arts, Harry. There are dark curses, dark potions, dark creatures. Rituals. All intended to combat what Dark wizards fear most from their opponents—death," Tom said quietly. "I call it the Vol de Mort project."

The Vol de Mort project.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked.

“Flight from death.”

And Harry didn't exactly cringe away from it. Instead, he watched the man and scooted just a little bit closer, intrigued. Tom looked odd—like he was trying to stifle his excitement with his typical arrogance—and it made Harry smile. He smiled wide.

“So, we would be using Dark magic to find a way to reverse the effects of other Dark magic. We’re going to repurpose Dark magic to do the exact opposite of what it’s meant to do,” Harry said and he leaned back, laughing in disbelief. “You know what you’re saying right?”

“You think I’m mad,” Tom observed.

"I think you're fucking brilliant. This is breaking the first natural law of magic. This is dealing with life and death shit," Harry rasped, nearly vibrating in excitement.

Tom tilted his head and nodded, his lips curling into a tiny smile. “Yes. We’re going to learn all of that Dark magic and harness it to stop death in its tracks.”

And it wasn’t ever really a question. Harry loved his work. He loved magic and Healing. He loved doing the impossible and he loved exceeding expectations. He wanted to be great and Tom, though he had many faults, *was* great. Tom was his teacher, and if he thought he could do this, then...it didn’t matter. It had never really been a question at all.

Harry was in love with this brilliant man.

And Harry wanted to lean forward and press a kiss against Tom’s jaw, but he didn’t.

Instead, he grinned and asked, "When do we start?"

Tom waved his wand, sharply and a file flew into Harry’s lap, flipping over to show a glossy picture of a young woman. She was dressed in bright green Quidditch robes and leathers, a Firebolt clutched tightly in one hand. She looked rather nervous under their gazes until her eyes narrowed, and Harry saw the hidden steel.

“We start now. Our first case: Katie Bell.”

Chapter End Notes

Yo.

Everyone's a hot ass mess. Except for Neville. But, like, give it time. I intend to make his life a hot ass mess too. It's just hard because I need a good storyline for him--like not as bad as Harry's crazy storyline because I love Neville and he doesn't deserve that shit, but a good one nonetheless. If anyone has any suggestions, feel free to drop it in the comments.

ALSO: Someone made me FANART!

This is Blop's Tumblr

Follow because they're an AMAZING artist!

This is Tom and Harry's first procedure

And this, is Hermione

Isn't it lovely????

Anyway, until next time, y'all.

EDIT:

Credit given where credit is due: Yaa Sang. The link is in the last chapter.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione sometimes hated Muggle London.

It was loud and fast—and the wizarding world was too—but this place never felt quite like home.

That was something that Wendell and Monika Granger didn't quite understand. They never had, though they tried. It wasn't their fault, not really. It wasn't their fault that Hermione had been a know-it-all swot all through Hogwarts with no friends, and now, suddenly, she had found her place, her family. They tried. They really did, but couldn't.

Hermione didn't want to say it was because they were Muggles.

"So...Creature Induced Injuries, eh? What's that like? Like treating pet bites?" Wendell asked curious and good-natured.

"Oooh, a vet, of sorts?" Monika asked.

But, it was because they were Muggles.

"I brought a werewolf-mauled girl back from the brink of death with unicorn hair and a sewing kit," Hermione said, her voice flat.

Monika and Wendell looked at her as if they weren't sure whether or not to believe her.

Hermione's father picked at his salad. Hermione glumly looked down at her own limp salad. She wished that she was back at Grimmauld Place, eating the leftovers from last night or ordering take away. Her parents would have a heart attack if they knew she had foregone the vegan diet that they had raised her on in favor of tikka masala and Harry's shitty eggs.

"So...how are your housemates? Henry and Roscoe and...Nelson?" Wendell guessed.

"Harry, Ron, and Neville. They're...great," Hermione said because she wasn't sure how else to describe them.

Her boys.

"Any hospital gossip?" Monika asked brightly, leaning forward. "I know when *I* was in dentistry school, it was always about who is sleeping with and who is doing what illegal procedure on who?"

"Mum!" Hermione squeaked.

“Are you using lube, honey? I’m telling you lube is everything,” Monika said knowledgeably.

Hermione groaned, burying her face in her hands. “Can you *not*? Dad, please—”

“Your mother is asking viable questions, sweetheart,” Wendell said absently. He always let her mother get away with this shit.

Hermione’s only saving grace was that the batty woman hadn’t managed to meet her friends yet.

“Oh, these friends...have you had any of these friends’ penis in your mouth?” Monika asked sweetly.

Hermione’s head thudded to the table. “Harry is gay and madly in love with his boss! And Neville has a girlfriend!”

“And that...Roscoe...no, *Ron*, fellow?” Wendell asked curiously. “Is he a handsome sort?”

"Yes, he's very handsome, but I haven't had his penis in my mouth, Dad," Hermione hissed, her eyes wide with fury. She decided to shovel the chopped kale power salad into her mouth to stop herself from saying anything else she might regret.

Sometimes, Hermione wondered how she had turned on the way she had when she had the two of *them* for parents.

“Now, Hermione, you know if you can’t talk about sex, you shouldn’t be having it,” Monika chided.

“I can talk about sex well and fine. I just don’t want to talk about with my *mum* and *dad* in a *public* restaurant. Merlin,” Hermione hissed, shaking her head.

God, she hated kale.

“Really, you must have him over for dinner. We’ll make him spaghetti squash and tofu balls. Or your father will. Wendell’s balls are the best,” Monika said wolfishly.

“You make me want to commit suicide,” Hermione said flatly.

“No, don’t do that,” Wendell said quickly. He winked at her. “But, my balls really *are* the best.”

“You two are insufferable,” Hermione hissed, eating twice as fast. The faster she finished, the faster she could get out of there. “He’s...not...he doesn’t...my boss likes him.”

“So?” Monika snorted. “Does he like your boss?”

“No. He likes me,” Hermione muttered, unable to make eye contact. “But, he *could* like my boss.”

“But, if you like him and he likes you, who gives a shit about the boss?” Wendell asked curiously.

“*I* give a shit about her,” Hermione snapped. “She’s brilliant and she’s my teacher. I *begged* her to be my teacher. I said she could have him if she would be—”

Hermione cut herself off.

Monika tutted to herself. “How archaic of you, Hermione. An interesting reversal of traditional gender-based transactions of sexuality, but, ultimately, not well done.”

Hermione huffed.

“I know. It was awful of me,” Hermione confessed softly.

“Yes, it was,” Wendell observed, but he had a twinkle in his eye. “But, you’ve never really given a shit about other people’s feelings when they got in the way of your goals. So, why do you care now?”

“Because Harry said it was crazy. That I was crazy,” Hermione said softly. “And I think he’s right. But...Ron deserves better.”

“Ron wouldn’t find better,” Monika said, her eyes glowing. “Brilliant witch like you? Top of your class, off to sew up werewolf girls and half-fish girls—”

“Mermaids, Mum, and not my job,” Hermione interjected though she couldn’t help her grin.

“God, you’ve got *mermaids* too!” Wendell marveled.

“Anyway, he wouldn’t find better,” Monika said. She hesitated. “Do you have magical STIs or just the regular ones? Also, contraception. How have you been doing with that?”

Hermione flushed, embarrassed.

If there was one thing that she should’ve picked up from her parents, it was that contraception was key. She was always the provider of condoms at Hogwarts despite the very little sex that she had been having at the time. And then, the one time she had decided *not* to use contraception, she had gotten pregnant.

How not very on.

“Hermione?” Wendell asked.

Hermione huffed. “I...it doesn’t matter now. The problem’s been taken care of,” she snapped. That phrase stopped them in their tracks. They wouldn’t ask anymore, never pry. They would weird and invasive in their pursuit of helpfulness, but whenever she uttered those words, they would step back.

She adored them for it.

“Very well. Send an owl to us every now and then. We’ll send you some more condoms. And think of an IUD, sweetheart, if you’re going to be exclusive. I’ve one in and it’s—”

“Mum, really?” Hermione asked.

Monika smirked. “You’re a bit of a handful, aren’t you, sweetheart? Now, aren’t you going to get your man?”

Hermione sighed, spooning the rest of her salad into her mouth

“I’ve got to go,” Hermione said sharply, standing up and nearly knocking her chair back.

Monika grinned, flashing her a thumbs up.

“Oh, now?” Wendell asked. He always seemed a little lost when the banter between Hermione and Monika really picked up.

“I’m going to find him,” Hermione said, hurriedly packing her things. She’d change into a robe before she went stalking Ron across the English countryside. Hermione paused, looking at her parents. “Also, I hate kale and I eat chicken now.”

DIAGNOSIS

Ron tramped back inside, his twin brothers and little sister on his heels. They had spent the entire morning degnoming the garden and now they were finally settling in for lunch. Ron’s back and arms ached from the work, but it felt familiar in a way that a lot hadn’t until then. He didn’t mind so much. As he looked around the Burrow, he felt more at peace than he had in a long time.

“After lunch, you want to do pick-up Quidditch?” Ginny asked, her eyes glowing. She had cut her hair since the last time he had seen her. It was still long on top, but cut close on the sides, and done artfully up into a coiff. She looked edgy.

She probably still had a string of boys and girls running after her, as she always had when they were both at Hogwarts at the same time. It had endlessly annoyed Ron at the time, but now, he was kinda proud that his sister could pull so easily.

And her hair probably annoyed the *hell* out of their mum.

“Sure. Us against the twins?” Ron asked.

“You’ll lose!” Fred shouted. Both Fred and George raced past Ron and Ginny, nearly bowling him over in pursuit of getting to the table.

“Will you two calm down? To imagine you’re of age! Entrepreneurs! Still, you act like schoolchildren!” Molly shrieked, and Ron grinned to himself. Molly liked to yell, but Ron thought that it was all in good fun. She thought they were funny too.

“Really, Mum, they run a joke shop. I don’t think they’ll ever learn to be adults,” Percy said primly from behind his paperwork. George snorted as he sat on one side of Percy and Fred draped himself across their older brother’s shoulders.

“Boring adults like Percy, you mean?” George teased.

“The horror!” Fred crowed.

Percy puffed up like a scorned peacock. “I’ll have you know that I am—”

“The ‘*Junior Assistant to the Minister for Magic himself’*,” Ginny said, mockingly. She smirked, sitting down across from, pressing into their father’s side. Arthur looked up from his tinkering and smiled at his youngest child, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “Yes, we know. You’ve told us.”

“A thousand times,” Ron added. “Say, when are you going to get promoted?”

Percy turned pink. “Well, you’re still only a trainee.”

“I’ve declared my specialty yesterday,” Ron said with a shrug. “Emergency & Triage. I’ll be training with Bellatrix Black.”

“Really?” Ginny squeaked. “She’s bloody brilliant, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. She is. How do *you* know about her?” Ron asked curiously.

“Because! I know she took a sabbatical and she served as the Healer for the Holyhead Harpies for the last half of the season. I heard it on the wireless. Gwenog Jones was nearly out after a gnarly fall and then, Black helped her out, and she was good as new!” Ginny babbled.

“Will someone help me get the lunch on the table? Ginny!” Molly called.

“You’ve got a wand! Use it!” Ginny shouted back.

“GINNY!”

“Just because I’m a bloody woman, I need to help you in the kitchen?” Ginny demanded.

Molly walked out from the kitchen, her hands on her plump waist, eyes narrowed at her daughter.

“I don’t give a damn what you’ve got between your legs. You’re not supposed to be here this weekend. You’re here because you got in trouble. Now, come help me with lunch,” Molly barked.

Ginny grumbled, stomping off to the kitchen, her eyes narrowed.

“What’s she in trouble for?” Ron asked curiously.

Arthur turned pink. Fred and George exchanged grins.

“She was caught shagging in Transfiguration classroom,” Fred snorted.

Ron’s mouth dropped open. “Shagging *who*?”

“Boys…” Arthur warned.

“I thought she was dating...what’s his name? Dean Thomas! From my year,” Ron said, snapping the boy’s name into remembrance.

“Yes, well, she broke up with him. She was caught with Helen Dawlish! The girl with the big...you know,” George said with a wink.

Ron barked out a laugh. “Good job, Gin!”

“THANKS!” Ginny roared from the kitchen.

“Not good,” Molly snapped as she waved her wand and the food followed after her through the air. Ginny carried a stack of plates in her own arms as she went to set the table. “It was embarrassing is what it was. No one should...you shouldn’t do…”

“Have sex before marriage?” Ginny said with a wolfish grin. “Too late, Mum.”

Molly turned red and shook her head. Ginny finished setting the table and sat down.

“You should really listen to Mum, Ginny,” Percy said, self-importantly. “Sex is only the most base aspect of a relationship. Communication, trust, and intimacy are even more important. Aubrey and I have really made some—”

“What Percy is trying to say is that he’s still a little virgin that’s jealous of his little sister’s game,” George interrupted.

Percy cursed under his breath, shaking his head.

“Harry could hear some of that,” Ron said, looking over at Percy. “Communication, trust, and intimacy. Bet he doesn’t know the *meaning* of those words.”

“Harry?” Ginny asked curiously.

“Harry Potter. My housemate,” Ron supplied helpfully. Now, his entire family was watching him, paying the utmost attention. They liked to pry at him with questions so when he was freely offering up information, it was like everyone couldn’t find something better to do like assemble the amazing sandwich meats their mother had laid out for them. “I live with Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom, and...Hermione Granger.”

Ginny's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Oh, the Longbottoms! Frank and Alice are amazing, aren't they?" Molly said sweetly.

"Oh, and the Potters. Never saw much of the mother, but James is great," Arthur added, sounding perpetually in awe.

"And this Hermione Granger?" Fred asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Ron's ears turned pink. "She's...nobody."

"Doesn't look like nobody?" George grinned.

"She really doesn't sound like nobody. Who is she?" Percy asked.

Ron groaned. If even Percy was getting into it, there was no way he was going to get out of answering their invasive questions.

Just as Ron steeled himself for the inevitable. There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" Ginny roared.

"Merlin, Gin. Inside voice," Arthur said with a wince.

Ginny bounded towards the door, going around the corner to throw open the door. Fred and George craned their head, trying to see who it was around the bend. There was an audible gasp. Then, soft murmuring. Ginny turned back into the sitting area, a shit-eating grin on her face.

"Ron...it's for you," she smirked.

Ron swallowed hard, wondering if Emmeline had fucking *found* him.

Except, it was a girl with dark, satin skin and overlarge front teeth, and her curls spiraling out around her head in a way that he never saw at work because she *always* wore it pulled back. He could already smell the coconut oil scent that followed her around.

Ron swallowed. "Hermione."

"Ron."

DIAGNOSIS

"Harry's here!"

"Harry!"

Harry smiled to himself as he dusted the ashes off of him just in time for Lavender to fling herself at him, her cane clattering to the floor. Harry caught the girl and buried his nose in her hair. She smelled like ocean salt and lilacs—a lovely scent. Harry pulled back, holding Lavender by her shoulders as he beamed down at her.

"You look better. So much better," he said.

Lavender posed, dramatically. "Your person does good work. You can barely tell that I was nearly ripped apart by werewolves and Snatchers!" she said cheerfully.

This was true. The only sign that the incident had happened was the razor-thin silvery lines that stretched across her skin, where the unicorn hair had sewn her together. He could only see it in certain lights—like now, when she was so close to the roaring fire in the fireplace.

Harry looked over Lavender's head, his expression softening. James and Lily waited. James had his cane in hand. That looked like it was going to be a permanent thing, unlike Lavender's cane. He was grinning, and Harry smiled back at the pair of them. Lily's eyes lit up and in that light, it looked like she was beaming.

"Glad you could make it, son," James said in greeting.

"Yeah. I said I'd come for lunch," Harry said. He pulled away from Lavender, leaving only an arm around her shoulders. "What *is* for lunch?"

"Remus made a roast and Mum tried to help make the bread but it's a little burnt," Lavender said.

Lily looked put out. "Well, I'm not some sort of...Suzie Homemaker. I'm a *Healer*," Lily snapped.

"And a damned good one," James crowed, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

Lavender and Harry exchanged disgusted looks as they pushed past their parents, muttering to one another as they walked towards the kitchen.

"How's *Riddle*?" Lavender hissed under her breath, taunting him.

"Shut up, you bint. Ixnay on the omtay," Harry snapped back.

Lavender gave him a look and rolled her eyes. Harry rolled his eyes right back, twice as hard. They walked into the kitchen and Remus looked up at Harry, delighted. He was looked so young and happy. Every time Harry saw his second godfather, he was reminded of how much older he had looked when Harry was a kid. Remus' wolfsbane hadn't helped much with his entire werewolf transformation but the advancement of technology had seen an improved wolfsbane potion, courtesy of one Severus Snape.

Snape was a crotchety, bitter bastard—who was desperate for a married woman, no less—but he was a crotchety, bitter bastard with some use.

“Harry! It’s been too long since I last saw you when there wasn’t a dire emergency,” Remus said, wrapping his arms around Harry. Harry returned the hug, slightly chagrined.

“It has. Sorry about that,” Harry mumbled.

Remus pulled back just enough to look into Harry’s eyes. “You had your reasons,” he murmured softly, absolving Harry.

Harry smiled weakly. “I heard you made a roast?”

“And *I* picked up a treacle tart from the bakery in the village!” Sirius called, wrapping his arms around both Harry and Remus, hugging them hard.

Harry’s suspicions were realized. They were trying to butter him up so he didn’t storm out again.

“Cool. My favorite,” Harry acknowledged. Sirius beamed.

They settled into this strange moment of peace where they spoke of unimportant things as Remus and James helped set the table, sending plates and forks and knives flying to the table. Sirius and Lavender went to bring the roast out, and Harry poked fun at his mother’s sorry attempt at baking bread. It really wasn’t so terrible, but it was burnt, and Harry had always known Lily to be good at literally everything she’d ever done. It was nice to see that she couldn’t bake bread.

When they were all at the table, Harry immediately reached for Lavender’s plate and he was shocked when he saw Lily’s hand on the other edge.

“What?” Harry began.

Lily smiled tightly. “I just...I’ve gotten used to making her plate.”

“Oh, I’ve always…” Harry trailed off, frowning. His hold on the plate tightened.

Lavender looked between the two of them before she snatched her plate from them both.

“I’m not an invalid,” she said quickly, keeping her voice light as she spooned Yorkshire pudding and roast potatoes onto her plate. “I can make my own plate of food.”

“Of course,” Lily said swiftly.

“Right,” Harry said only a half second later.

Lavender gave him a look and he shook away any awkwardness, affecting a bright smile again.

“I hear that you’ve declared your specialty,” Remus said with a soft smile.

“Yeah. Spell Damage specialist,” Harry said with a bright smile.

Lily leaned forward, her eyes glowing. “Remus, he’s *gifted*. Absolutely incredible. His instincts...just frankly brilliant,” she said in the same tone she had when she was on the brink of a medical breakthrough.

Pride flashed through Harry, making his stomach turn. He busied himself with stuffing some of the roast into his mouth.

“I’m sure. He’s powerful and smart. Like his parents,” Remus said with a soft smile.

“How’s your friend, Ron, doing? Saved me a leg, I hear,” James laughed.

“He’s doing well,” Harry said softly. “He just declared Emergency & Triage. Bellatrix Black is his teacher.”

Sirius grimaced. “Bad luck that. Bella is a bitch, and she’s even worse now after that whole thing with Riddle,” Sirius babbled. Lily, Harry, and Lavender winced. “Do you know what happened there? They seemed...as happy as two Slytherins—no offense—can be, and suddenly, she’s gone.”

"She cheated on him with Rodolphus Lestrange. He left her," Harry said, his voice cool.

Sirius and James exchanged glances.

“Wow...I didn’t...Bellatrix has been in love with Riddle for years. Since they were both firsties at Hogwarts, even,” Sirius said.

Harry mashed his roast potatoes under the tines of his fork.

“Yeah, well. He’s over her. Way, way over her,” Harry said firmly. “Tom is so, *so* over her it, isn't even fucking funny. So. So. Over. Her."

“You’re going to break the plate, Harry,” Lavender muttered from the corner of her mouth.

Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t realized how he was stabbing at his plate with his fork. He looked over at Lily, pleading. She seemed confused. Harry wasn’t surprised. He had never looked at her to save him from his father and godfather’s shared nonsense.

“What’s your favorite case so far?” Lily demanded immediately.

Not shocking that the only thing she could talk about was Healing. He’d take it.

“My first case, of course. Hela-Wasting Curse mixed with a Heart-Fragmenting Curse. Internal procedure on the first day and Tom let me make the cut. Absolutely brilliant,” Harry said cheerfully. He preened when his godfathers and father looked at him, impressed.

“I saw you two doing your Yaa Sang procedure. Some of your spellwork was sloppy,” Lily commented.

Harry winced. “I was doing it on the fly.”

“You misunderstand. I’m not...it’s meant to be a critique. You can do better. I commend your imagination,” Lily said stiffly.

Harry relaxed. He smiled. “Thanks. Tom...kinda said the same thing after.”

“How are you and Tom doing?” Lily asked. “I heard you two left together the other day.”

Harry snorted. “Who’s gossiping about me to my *mother*?” he demanded with a smile. “It’s not like that, Mum. First, he’s my teacher. He asked, apparently. Zacharias Smith was *furious*. Anyway, Tom was presenting his hypothesis. Mum, it was *adorable*. He’s got research everywhere and he writes all of his ideas out. It’s so messy. Usually, it looks sterile...unlived in. But, he was just so enthusiastic and it sounds...well he sounds fucking *brilliant*, as he always is, and you know how charming he can be. Anyway, I’ve...signed onto his project.”

Lily’s eyes widened. “You *have*? Oh, I'm nearly jealous. I have a feeling he's got something incredible up his—"

“Tom. You call him Tom. And you went home with him?” Sirius asked, his voice hoarse.

Harry’s heart dropped. He had forgotten that it wasn’t only the two of them at the lunch table.

Lily blanched. “Did they...not know about that?” she asked hesitantly.

“Mum, if you’re going to be included in the ‘Harry’s life is trash and here are his secrets’ club, you’ve gotta learn that Dad and Sirius *never* know about anything," Lavender chastised, her lips curled into a smile as she looked at James and Harry as if she were watching a rather exciting Quidditch match.

“I’m sorry—” Lily began.

“Nope. Don’t apologize,” Harry said, never looking away from James. “I’m not ashamed of him.”

“You *knew*? And you didn’t tell me?” James demanded, looking at his wife.

“First, I didn’t *know* you didn’t know. Second, Albus says that if I want to improve my relationship with Harry, I have to show him respect by keeping our conversations private,” Lily said, reciting her words from therapy. She looked rather proud of herself and Lavender gave her mum a covert thumbs up.

“You slept with your boss,” James said flatly.

“I slept with my *boyfriend*. He was my boyfriend and now, he’s not. It’s moot”

“He’s too old for you,” Sirius pointed out. “And you just said he’s your teacher!”

Remus looked up from his tea, his amber eyes hard. “Mind your business, Sirius,” he warned.

“Remus, he’s my godson! He is my business!”

“His sex-life isn’t,” Remus returned. “Sirius, I’m serious.”

“No, I’m Sirius.”

“*Sirius*,” Remus warned with one more look before he gave Harry a soft look. “This conversation is over.”

“Thanks,” Harry breathed in relief.

“I say it’s not!” James said, slamming his fist on the table, his hazel eyes blazing with fury. “I should go to St. Mungo’s and give Riddle a piece of my mind!”

“Could you *not*?” Harry demanded. “I’m working with him on his project.”

“And that requires you to fall into his bed?” James snarled.

“*That’s* none of your business!” Harry shrieked, jumping up to his feet.

“He’s going to leave you, you know. Just like he did to my cousin!” Sirius said.

There was a long moment of silence and Harry felt his eyes sting. Lily was staring at Sirius with wide eyes, and Remus looked appalled. Sirius looked as if he had immediately regretted his words. James only looked self-righteous.

Harry spun and stormed away from the room, making nonsensical screams as he went. There was only silence in his wake.

James flinched from the disapproval in Lily’s eyes.

“Good job, Dad. Now, you’ve done it,” Lavender huffed.

DIAGNOSIS

“Come in, come in! You must Ronnie’s girlfriend!” Molly said cheerfully.

Hermione snorted behind her hand and then she squawked when Molly bustled up to her, enveloping her in an enormous hug and squeezed hard. Hermione’s eyes widened as she looked over Molly’s shoulder at Ron in alarm. Ron grinned triumphantly.

Ronnie, Hermione mouthed spitefully.

Ron’s good mood rapidly vanished.

“I’m Hermione. Hermione Granger,” Hermione said in greeting.

“And she’s not my girlfriend,” Ron pointed out unhelpfully.

Hermione rolled her eyes and suddenly, she seemed to realize how many Weasleys there really were in the room. She was hopelessly outnumbered.

“Not hard to believe that. She’s too fit to be with someone like you,” Fred called.

Both Fred and George devolved into a fit of giggles that was only smothered when Molly glared at them.

“Naturally,” Hermione said with a small grin. They looked surprised by the way she slid into the dynamic. They wouldn’t know that Hermione just *loved* to roast Ron. “I’m also too smart.”

“Right you are. This one is already going to be published,” Ron acknowledged as he led her towards the table, careful not to touch her. Hermione looked both put out and grateful, and he hated that he let her have it both ways.

Hermione always made him so *weak* for her.

“Let me introduce you. That’s my dad. Arthur Weasley,” Ron began, pointing towards the thin, tall balding man with fluffs of red hair as bright as his children’s. “My oldest brother, Bill, is off with his wife. She’s pregnant so they might pop by St. Mungo’s sometime soon. Then, there’s Charlie, but he’s in Romania. Dragon wrangling. That specky git is Percy.”

Percy stiffened, his chest puffing up. “That’s *quite* unnecessary, Ron—”

“Those two there are Fred and George—”

“I’m Fred.”

“No, *I’m* Fred.”

Ron groaned. “It doesn’t blood matter—”

“Watch your language!” Molly chastised loudly.

Hermione snorted behind her hand.

Ron’s ears turned pink and he huffed, rolling his eyes at Hermione. “Then, me. And the youngest. Icky little Gin-Gin,” Ron said, sneering though there was mischief in his eyes. Immediately, Hermione knew that ‘Gin-Gin’ was his favorite sibling.

"It's Ginny. Ginny Weasley. I think I remember you from Hogwarts," Ginny said. She was thin and boyish with red hair closely cropped to her head. "The Ravenclaw swot."

“That’s me,” Hermione said with a small smile.

“You live with Ron, then? Is he as much of a lazy pig wherever you live as he is here?” Ginny asked, mockingly. She let out a brash laugh when she dodged whatever jinx Ron sent her way and she stuck out her tongue. She didn’t let Hermione answer the question. “I’m on a

break for the weekend. Can you tell me how Lavender Brown-Potter is? She hasn't been responding to my owls."

"What are you writing Harry's sister for? I thought you were only friends with the Quidditch team and all your shag buddies," Ron barked. He looked over at Hermione, pride in his eyes. "She's Captain. And Chaser."

"She's nice, and I heard what happened to her. And she's bloody fit, you know," Ginny said with a grin. "Was wondering if she wanted a shoulder to cry on?"

"Merlin, Ginny…" Ron snorted, shaking his head.

He glanced at Hermione again, and she looked caught between amusement and slightly overwhelmed. The twins were already dragging her forward, intent on demanding to know everything about St. Mungo's.

"Oi! Ask her about that party Ron threw at Grimmauld Place! Romilda Vance insists that she went but that can't be true. Was it really that great?" Ginny asked, already abandoning her favorite brother to skid back into her seat. Hermione was being guided into Ron's abandoned chair, Molly bustling around, muttering about how *peaky* Hermione was.

Even with being bombarded by questions, Hermione was methodically going through them, never giving any one person more attention than the other.

Ron smiled softly.

She fit right in.

"I'm a Muggleborn," she was saying, "So I hadn't quite realized the extent of the career I could have in the wizarding world. My parents are dentists—Muggle teeth Healers—and I've always thought to follow in their footsteps."

"*Muggles,* are they? Merlin, Ron, you really should've brought your girlfriend around sooner," Arthur said, brightly. He leaned forward--probably to ask all about eklectrity and plugs and the like, but it was too much.

Suddenly, it was all too much.

Ron's teeth grounded together and Hermione looked overwhelmed, like she wanted to throw up, like she had after she had taken that Abortion Potion and had to pick up Harry from the floor, like she had just before she had sewn a girl back together, just like before she had declared her speciality, like she had when *he had kissed her* and—

"You need a smoke," Ron said, cutting through the silence.

"A what?" Percy asked.

Hermione blinked, wide-eyed and slow.

“She needs a smoke. Hermione, come on. You can smoke outside,” Ron said, gently, as if coaxing a wild animal. He held out his hand. “*We* need a smoke.”

“What a ridiculous—” Molly began, but Ron wasn’t looking at her.

Hermione stood immediately and took two wide steps forward. She grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers with his.

“You disappeared yesterday,” she said, soft and accusatory.

“Let’s go smoke. Do you have a pack with you?” Ron asked.

Hermione blinked. “I’ve already had two today. I saw my parents,” Hermione confessed.

“We’ll have one more,” Ron said back, just as soft. He opened the door for her, letting her through and he glanced over his shoulder. “We’ll be back. We’re going to smoke in the garden.”

They stomped out into the garden. Hermione was barely watching where she was going, absentmindedly kicking a gnome out of the way as she fished through her robes. She looked far more frazzled than she normally did. Ron was watching her, arms crossed over his chest.

“This is where you’ve been? You just disappeared,” Hermione snapped. She softened, jerking out that damn pack of cigarettes from the inside of her robes. She lifted one cigarette to her lips, lit the end with her wand and took a drag. The tension seemed to melt away with the first hit of nicotine. “I...we were worried. Neville and I cooked dinner for you.”

“I needed to go home,” Ron said quietly. “How did you even find me?”

“You talk about the Burrow sometimes. And I just used a Point-Me spell and Apparated until I found you,” Hermione said. She sounded mildly ashamed.

“You could’ve gone to Harry’s.”

“I...didn’t even think about that,” Hermione said. She sounded surprised about that. She tilted her head, staring at him with a deep frown on her face. “Why haven’t you looked at me since I got here? Why...she told you.”

“Yeah. She told me,” Ron said. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be feeling. He was angry, maybe. He was hurt, definitely. He couldn’t look away from her. She took a long drag from her cigarette, blew it into the air like an angry dragon. “She was crying about how I deserved a nice girl.”

“You do,” Hermione said softly.

“That you’re not a nice girl.”

“I’m not,” Hermione scoffed. She turned her head away. “She really likes you. A lot. When we were working together, she asked if you talked about her. You’d look good together, you know. And I did something shitty. I’m not nice. Emmeline’s a good—”

“Shut up,” Ron said sharply. Hermione looked shocked and she reared back before her eyes hardened, and she snarled, ready to snap back. Ron didn’t give her the chance. “You two traded me. Don’t just...you both are arseholes, you know that?”

“Excuse me?” Hermione demanded.

“First, you’re *both* arseholes. Yeah, you traded me—even though all I did was fucking kiss you—but, she fucking agreed. So, no one here is nice. The only nice person here is *me*,” Ron snapped and he continued on, nowhere near finished. “And second, I’m not a child. I’m a grown man. Fucking ‘nice girl’? What the hell are you two on about?”

“I just—”

“Nope, not done,” Ron said, holding up a finger. “*I* don’t like nice girls. Never have. I don’t give a shit about a nice girl. Do you know why I play chess, Hermione? Because I like the *challenge*. And you’re a challenge. You’re talented and rude and *mean* and gorgeous and, Merlin, you’re a mess. You make me feel well-adjusted. But, then...you do things like dance around to make people happy and smoke because you’re so angry you want to cry and we’re a *family*. We’re your family. Merlin, you want *us* as a family. You’re all fucked up inside.”

“Fuck off,” Hermione barked and she tossed the end of her cigarette to the ground, crushing it beneath her heel before it could burn the dry grass in the Burrow’s yard.

“You think that Healing is going to make you feel. You think that a successful career is going to make you happy. You think you know things and nothing else matters; no one else matters,” Ron snapped, stalking towards her. Hermione’s eyes widened and she tilted her head, looking at him as if he were a difficult Arithmancy problem. “You don’t get to toss me aside. I won’t let you. You think I don’t know you? People matter. I matter. We *matter.*”

And Ron knew at that moment that no one had ever told Hermione Granger anything like that before. No one had ever told her—be careful of the hearts you break in your path to success—because they hadn't ever thought there would be any hearts *to* break. It had always been about being the best, and the longer Ron looked at her, he wondered who had stolen pieces of this beautiful woman because she wasn't whole in the slightest.

But, neither was he.

“We matter,” she repeated softly, as if in wonder. “*We* matter.”

And then her hands were on his face and she was pulling his face down to hers. His neck protested, but he grabbed her by the waist and tugged her closer anyway. Hermione strained up on her toes and he sucked her bottom lip in between his. She let out a soft sound—nearly a whine, but not quite—as she ran her fingers through his hair and he dragged one hand up her spine, digging into the curls. She pulled back with a gasp, her eyes wide.

“I...you kiss good.”

Ron grinned down at her.

“Do I?” he teased gently.

Hermione only nodded, her lips slightly parted and swollen. “I’ll even excuse you touching my hair. Just...kiss me again. Please,” she said quietly.

And he did as she bid, kissing her again and again and again, flipping the bird at his fucking nosey siblings, while he did so.

DIAGNOSIS

“Merlin, he’s such a fucking *dickhead*!” Harry snarled, walking back and forth by the edge of the wood. Lavender sat perched on their rock, staring at him as he paced. “Who does he think he fucking his?”

“Are you talking about Sirius or Dad?” Lavender asked patiently.

“Both,” Harry hissed as he spun to look at his sister. She was watching him with a raised eyebrow. “Tom is *brilliant,* Lavender. Just brilliant. They should be happy for me!”

“They should,” Lavender confirmed.

Harry harrumphed. “He’s tall, hot, ambitious, talented, and *intelligent*. He’s got money and a good job, and he’s got a massive dick, Lav. Like you wouldn’t *believe*. Like, have you *ever* just looked at a cock and been like… ‘God must really love me'? Because that was *me*. When I saw his cock. It was…”

“I really don’t want to hear you wax poetics about your ex-boyfriend’s cock,” Lavender said, her nose scrunched delicately.

Harry faltered. *Ex-boyfriend*.

“They don’t get...he’s already left me, you know.”

Lavender sighed. “Didn’t you say *you* broke up with him?”

“And Sirius just...he threw *her* in my fucking *face.* Like I don’t have to see her every day! Like I don’t think about her every fucking day and what she...what she *took* from me,” Harry snarled, his voice cracking and his hands slammed over his face. He let out a shout and fell into a low crouch. He didn’t move, his body trembling.

“What did she take from you?” a voice asked and long fingers were wrapping around his wrist, pulling his hands away from his face.

Harry squawked when he stared up at Lily. She didn't flinch away from his gaze, simply crouched in front of him, with those green, green eyes that tore into him.

“She gave him a choice. Me or the grant. He...he picked a *grant* over *me*,” Harry said, like he was in confession, like he needed to be absolved. “I love him, Mum. I love him so much that it hurts to *breathe* sometimes.”

“He’s like us,” Lily murmured. “Never satisfied.”

It wasn’t a comfort. Nor was it an explanation.

It just was.

“Fuck, Dad,” Harry said instead. “And fuck Sirius too. Fucking pricks.”

“Here, here,” Lavender called from her perch on the rock.

Harry burst into a round of watery cackles and Lily’s lips twitched. Harry’s eyes widened when Lily fell into the grass, sitting cross-legged in between her two children, looking back and forth.

“Remus is giving them a dressing down they’ll never forget,” Lily said. “I almost hate to miss it.”

“Ask Remus for the memory afterward. It’ll be a treat,” Lavender said with a grin.

They fell into a companionable silence, unlike one that Harry had ever experienced with them. Whenever they were together before, it always ended sort of like this—Harry, spitting with rage, and Lavender, on the rock, watching. Except, this time, Harry wasn't angry with *Lily* and she sat in the grass with him, tearing at the fresh blades, digging her fingernails into the dirt.

And then, Lily began to hum softly to herself. Harry stared over at her in wonder.

She didn’t even seem to notice, but Harry remembered. He remembered that song. He glanced over at Lavender and she was staring at him with the same look in her eyes as the time that she had wiped vomit from the corner of his mouth—amused and terribly sad.

Harry looked away and he scooted closer to Lily. Slowly, he reclined in the grass, pressing his head against her thigh. Lily looked down at him, surprised and her hand hovered over his hair nervously. And then, she settled her fingers in his air and began to sing softly.

“*Edelweiss, edelweiss.*

Every morning you greet me.

Small and white, clean and bright.

You look happy to meet me.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that there's no Neville, but that's because I'm trying to prepare an arc for him and his family dynamics just aren't as interesting at the other three. I love me some Neville, but I accidentally made him more adjusted than his friends. With Alice and Frank Longbottom being alive, they didn't take too kindly to Neville being treated like shit as a kid so that didn't really happen very much outside of the old grandmother thing where they feel entitled to say things that they aren't entitled to.

But, Alice laid her straight a lot. So, I'm still trying to figure out a storyline for Neville. He deserves it.

ALSO, no Tom! Whoa! But, he's like sorta present so it doesn't count as much.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry stripped out of his t-shirt, pulling his robes over his head as he got ready for the day. Hermione was leaning against her cupboard, already fully dressed, going through her notes with the air of someone that was too tightly wound and too stressed to even know what she was reading. Harry sighed as he looked at her.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

"Notes that Vance left me. I'm only going to be assigned one case, in particular, today, but she's assigned me all her rounds. I've been revising all night," Hermione hissed under her breath.

Harry snorted. “Merlin, if this is how you’re acting now, I can’t imagine how you were, studying for NEWTs.”

Hermione looked up, eyes narrowed. “It was a dark time. I saw very little light.”

"Merlin," Neville called from his conversation, his lips curled into a grin. "As opposed to now, in the dark and crusty house that is Grimmauld Place?"

“The dark and crusty house you’re living in, rent-free, you mean?” Harry asked icily.

Neville grinned. “Touché,” he laughed, turning back to Ron.

Harry leaned forward, eyes curious. “Hermy—”

“Excuse me?” Hermione barked without even looking up from her notes. She pulled a Self-Inking quill from behind her ear to cross something out. Harry saw a spot of black ink just beneath her ear. He grinned.

He wasn’t gonna tell her.

“Are we not at nickname status? You’re like...my *sister*,” Harry pressed.

Hermione slowly tore her eyes away from her paper, eyes narrowed. “We will *never* be nickname status. Nicknames are for people without full good names like Hermione,” she said coolly. “We’re above nickname status. We’re *better* than that.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, okay. Anyway, when was the last time you had sex?”

“Merlin, you sound like my parents,” Hermione blurted out.

"Is that something your parents ask you, hag?" Ron asked, peeking over her shoulder at her notes. Hermione shoved at him, chewing on her bottom lip in embarrassment.

"*Yes* because they're embarrassing sociopaths. Now, go away, *Ronnie*," Hermione taunted. She looked over at Harry. "Ron's mum calls him 'Ronnie'. He, unlike us, is never above nickname status."

"Wow, really, *Hermy*?" Ron taunted.

"I will *hex* you," Hermione warned, pulling her wand. Ron danced out of the way, cackling to himself as he went back over to Neville, straddling the bench. Hermione's eyes followed him, her lips pulled into a tiny smile.

Harry grinned, smugly. "You still like him? You wanna *lick* him and *kiss* him and *fuck* him. You want him to have your—"

"Harry!" Hermione complained.

Harry laughed, shaking his head. "Okay, but seriously, you need to be dicked down," Harry remarked. Hermione's lips curled into a sneer of distaste as his words. "You seem so...uptight lately. Do you wanna talk about it?"

"Absolutely not," Hermione said firmly. Harry raised an eyebrow at her and seemed to be thinking about pushing her buttons. Hermione glowered at him. "Emmeline Vance isn't an easy teacher. She's demanding and harsh. I'm just...*stressed*."

"Masturbate. Natural stress reliever," Harry said plainly.

"How crass," Draco called from across the room.

Harry sneered over his shoulder. "Mind your business, Malfoy."

Draco leaned forward, probably to say something even more stupid, but Astoria grabbed him by the arm, dragging him back towards her. Harry turned his full attention back to Hermione, raising an eyebrow. She wasn't looking at him. Harry glanced over and Ron and Neville but they seemed embroiled in a deep conversation of their own.

"How's Katie Bell?" Hermione asked.

Harry hummed. "She's okay. I met her yesterday. She's finally been transferred semi-permanently to St. Mungo's. She...she looks bad," Harry said, his voice soft.

Hermione nodded sagely. "And what does Riddle think?"

"He thinks she's going to die," Harry whispered.

Hermione didn't look surprised. "It's a trial, Harry. That means you keep trying until something works. Statistically, it won't work on the first go around," she said. She sounded gentle, but her words made Harry flinch and look away, anyway. She reached forward, patting his cheek and said nothing else as they got ready for the day.

"Well, it's just me on her case today," Harry said softly. "She better not die when it's just me here."

Some of the department heads were off to a Healing conference, which meant that generally, it was the trainees and some of the lower-ranked Healers that had inherited their cases.

“Are the trainees ready?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks at Dumbledore’s genial voice floated through the open door to the trainee’s changing room. The other trainees looked just as intrigued and they filed out and were met with the Head Healer. Dumbledore beamed at all of them as if they were remarkable when they were really just a bunch of shitty half-Healers.

“What’s this about?” Ron muttered in Harry’s ear as he and Neville made up the last of their little quartet.

“No idea,” Harry whispered back.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together. “Good, good! Everyone is here. Now, as you all know, quite a few of your mentors are attending the Calderon Healing Conference across the pond until tomorrow evening. In the meantime, the world doesn’t stop turning. Each of you will take on an assigned case or floor, and will act as a representation of your mentor.”

“Yeah Bellatrix will have my ass if I don’t do well,” Ron murmured.

Harry grimaced at the thought of that epic bitch.

“Vance would eviscerate me,” Hermione groaned.

“But, I believe to motivate, we will make this interesting,” Dumbledore continued. The whispering through the trainee cohort quieted, and they all looked at him, a sudden edge in the air.

“Interesting?” Harry muttered under his breath.

Dumbledore’s electric blue eyes fell on him as if he had heard him and he beamed, nodding.

“Yes, interesting! I will be turning this lucky turn of events into a day-long skills lab,” Dumbledore announced. He paused for excitement. Harry rolled his eyes. The man was really very dramatic. “I have determined that whoever conducts themselves with the most decorum, demonstrates the most sense, intelligence, and teamwork shall be rewarded the opportunity to assist me in a Mind Healing internal procedure.”

There was a brief moment of silence before the shrieks began. Hermione was practically salivating, her frenzied eyes bright with excitement. Her hands were clamped on Ron and Harry’s shoulders, squeezing so hard their entire arms might fall off.

“Mind Healing internal procedure? Those are done once a century!” Hermione snarled. “It’s *mine*.”

“Yeah, fucking right. It’s mine!” Harry barked nastily.

They heard a haughty laugh behind them. "*D'accord, mais*…it is mine," Malfoy declared pompously.

Dumbledore's lips curled into a smile and he waved his wand. "Your assignments can be found on the parchment rolls in your cupboards. And *go*."

DIAGNOSIS

"Well, hello, again, Miss Bell," Harry said as cheerfully as possible as he entered the room.

Katie Bell was a young woman—a few years older than Harry for sure—with broad shoulders and a stern jaw. She was athletic. She *looked* like a Quidditch player, and according to her stats, she was going to be a very good one. He didn't remember her from Hogwarts, but she, surely, must have been on the team. A Gryffindor, Harry decided. She had that brash, headstrong look about her—of course, Harry had the same look about him, but he was contrary enough to want to be placed in Slytherin despite all of his very Gryffindor-ish qualities.

"Healer Potter," Katie said gruffly. "So, I suppose Healer Riddle really isn't here?"

"No. It's just for me for a day or so. He'll be back soon," Harry said as he walked around her room. "How are you feeling today?"

"Just as shitty as yesterday," Katie snapped.

Harry winced.

That was a valid statement. Katie's case had been an Artifact Accidenter case that Tom had poached because of the unusual circumstances.

She had been at the Holyhead Harpies training camp, in line to be one of the new starting Chasers when the season began in a week or so. The Sports column of the Daily Prophet said that she was extraordinary—the female Viktor Krum and what not. And then, all of sudden, she had been getting fan mail and hate mail abundantly. It had come to a head when she'd received a rather lovely opal necklace that had turned out to be cursed.

Tom had fallen in love with the case instantly.

Harry had been a little miffed—so easy to fall in love with a Dark curse, but not with Harry, nope. Not with the man that had literally begged for him. But, Dark magic? Oh, yeah, sure.

"Is your face okay?" Katie asked.

Harry flinched. He hadn't known he was making weird faces.

“Yeah. Sorry about that. Now, let’s take a look at what we’re facing today, shall we?” Harry asked. He waved his wand, casting the diagnostics charm and carefully didn’t wince at what he saw. Katie already looked resigned.

“Bad news, isn’t it?” Katie asked quietly.

“It’s not...great,” Harry allowed. 34% of her musculature was atrophying from the curse. Whatever it was, was complex and meant to kill all at once or as slowly as possible.

Apparently, Katie had only touched it. She had been thrown into the air, an imaginary air whipping around her as the curse took root. That had been all that was needed. It had burrowed itself deep inside of her muscles, feeding off of her. It was as if her body was eating itself. First the muscles, then the nervous system, and then, probably her organs.

Fuck.

Great day for Tom to decide to fuck off to a *fucking* medical conference.

“So, what does that mean?” Katie asked. “Will I be able to play again?”

Harry hummed. “That’s the plan.”

“I signed up for this study because you two promised me results,” Katie snapped. “I’m not seeing any results. Do you even know what this curse is?”

Harry let out another sighed and grabbed a chair, swinging it around so that he could straddle it, looking at Katie with a calmness he didn’t feel in the least.

"Look, Katie, let me explain a few things about curses. I do Spell Damage. All kinds of spells. Could be anything from transfiguration to charms gone wrong. Healer Riddle and I specialize in curses. Curses are terribly complex things. They’re practically living, sentient creatures, created by malevolence. Little bastards that are parasites and will do *anything* to live,” Harry said starkly.

Katie looked surprised by his description of a curse. Harry wasn’t surprised. Not many thought of magic as something living.

“Okay. But...will I play *Quidditch*?” Katie asked, her voice cracking.

Harry stared at her, unblinking. "I don't know. That's what I can honestly tell you. If we were doing this the normal way, no. This is a Dark curse. It leaves scars, usually on whatever part of the body the curse is attacking. I would say, you won't be able to build the muscle back. You'd have to use a walker or a cane for the rest of your life. But, because of this trial, I can tell you, *happily,* that I don’t know.”

“Happily?” Katie whispered.

“It’s good that I don’t know. Healer Riddle and I are doing something no one else has ever thought to do. Fighting Dark curses with Dark magic. Trying to reverse the damage. So, hold tight. All we can do is *manage* it for now, and then, we’ll take the next steps to reverse it.

But, I need you to meet me here," Harry said, holding out his hand to her. Katie looked at him nervously. "I need you to trust me and have hope. You can do that?"

Slowly, Katie lifted her trembling hand, reaching out to grab his fingers. "Yeah."

Almost immediately after, her hand collapsed, weak.

Despite that, Harry beamed. "Good. Let's get started. We're changing your dose of the pain potion. We added a bit more valerian to deal with the insomnia. We're also going to see about getting you to PT, so if we can't stop or reverse the atrophying, we can slow it down or even, *hopefully*, maintain your current muscle mass…"

DIAGNOSIS

"What the bloody hell is that mess on your tray? Where are the chips?" Harry demanded as he set down his tray in front of Hermione. He picked at the slightly cold pasta in front of him and sighed. It seemed like the house elves were having an off-day, though the chocolate biscuits he'd grabbed looked promising.

"My mum and dad wrote me a letter last night guilting me about the consumption of fried foods and cooked animal carcasses," Hermione said dryly. She picked at the chickpea salad, looking quite sad about it. "I am appeasing the animal gods and my conscience with a salad."

Harry blanched. "Excuse me? Please tell me this isn't permanent. How are we going to have Indian takeaway night if you don't eat spicy lamb vindaloo anymore?"

"Yeah, right. I'm going to write them back saying I take back my hatred for kale and have found spiritual balance in sustaining myself on only organic greenery to get them off my back until I have to visit with them again," Hermione snorted. She paused as she saw the weirded-out look that Harry was giving her. "Okay. My parents are weird. They're...hippie-ish"

"I thought they were *dentists*."

"They're hippie dentists who eat only organic vegetation, have an herb garden, unironically, loved that I turned out to be a witch because it validated their folk medicine beliefs, and like to ask when was the last time I got dick was," Hermione said. She winced when she saw the Cheshire cat smile spread across Harry's face. "And no, you're never going to meet them."

"Oh, come on! Why not? You've met *my* family. My insane family," Harry said. He sounded almost fond of them. Hermione's eyes softened.

"Don't care. You'll meet them on my deathbed and not a moment before," Hermione said, giggling under her breath. Harry's eyes widened.

"You just *giggled*!"

“Fuck,” Hermione muttered. “No, I didn’t.”

“You did, I heard you!”

“Shut *up*, Harry,” Hermione snorted.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Look—ugh, Malfoy.”

Hermione looked up to see the young man that had approached their table while they were embroiled in conversation. She pursed her lips, already irritated.

“Malfoy, how can I help you?” Harry asked, a sweetly venomous smile on his face. Malfoy returned it.

“I was going to tell you that I just corrected the *best* Spell Damage case. I caught a fast-acting Heart-Fragment Curse with one of the Healers and—”

“Been there. Done that. Bought the t-shirt. Add a Hela-Wasting Curse. Now, *that’s* difficult, sweetheart,” Harry snapped.

Malfoy’s cheeks pinked up in embarrassment and frustration.

“I got a letter from your mother today. She has heard how well Astoria and I are adjusting. Does your mother ever tell *you* how proud she is?” Malfoy taunted.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he slowly pulled his wand, shaking his head.

“Enough,” Hermione snapped. “You’ve both got mummy and daddy issues. We get it.”

Draco squawked, offended. “I do *not*—”

“Draco, enough,” Astoria said, her voice cold. There wasn’t any emotion in her eyes beside sheer boredom. Harry wondered, briefly, if she was always that bored. She was probably bored perpetually. She was probably bored by *orgasms*.

Pity for her.

“What do you want, Astoria?” Malfoy barked. “I was going to explain to Granger why I do not have—”

“You’ve been assigned to Emergency and Triage. Your break is over,” Astoria said coolly. She turned on her heel and walked away as if she hadn’t said anything in the first place.

Harry and Granger exchanged a look of glee. Malfoy looked properly cowed.

“Astoria! *Quelle? Je n’ai pas fini*—”

“*Je m’en fous*, Draco,” Astoria said, coolly. From the way her eyes flashed, Harry caught the feeling that she was angry, but, of course, Astoria was a soulless automaton so he couldn’t be sure.

“Where are you going then?” Malfoy demanded.

“I am working with Luna Lovegood today. She is quite odd, but also, quite brilliant. I enjoy working with her and children,” Astoria said, voice flat.

Harry blinked, surprised. Malfoy scowled at Harry and then scowled at Astoria’s back, and then, flounced off, like the little brat that he was. Harry sighed, stretching his arms over his head as he stood up, looking over at Hermione. Hermione watched him, unimpressed.

“What?” Harry sighed.

“You’re going to have to live with him being here,” Hermione said pointedly.

“I *am* living with it. See: me, alive, with him, here,” Harry snapped back.

Hermione snorted. “You know what I mean. He’s going to be here indefinitely. Don’t let him aggravate you like that. He just likes the attention.”

Harry huffed, shrugging. “Whatever. Just...next time, I’m going to lay him on his arse,” Harry muttered under his breath. When he saw Hermione winding up to a full blown lecture, he clapped his hands over his ears. “La, la, la. I have a patient to look after!”

Hermione watched him scamper away, amusement on her face. She went back, finishing off her salad with gusto. It actually didn’t taste like rot, for once, but that was probably due to the massive amounts of creamy dressing that she had smothered the lettuce with. When Hermione was finished, she ran over the cases for the day that she still had to do rounds for; she had to check in with Elizabeth Bath, the Spectre, a dragonologist transferred from Romania who was still re-growing some of the salvageable skin on his back, and a few others.

As she went to dispose of her tray, she felt a heat against her back.

“Hey, how are you?” Ron whispered in her ear.

Hermione stiffened for a half-second before she relaxed against him. Carefully, she disposed of her bowl and tray.

“Fine. Why?” Hermione asked in lieu of answering.

She could practically feel Ron’s grin.

“I can’t ask after my mad girlfriend?” Ron teased.

Hermione snorted and she walked towards the door, ignoring Ron on her heels. She paused again.

“Is that what I am? Your mad girlfriend?” Hermione asked.

Ron laughed. “Yeah, that’s what you are. Well, I hope so. Aren’t you?”

“Sure, arsehole,” Hermione allowed. She bit her bottom lip as she finally looked at him. He looked obscenely good in his hunter green robes. She thought he might look even better in the official bright green Healer robes. “Are you busy, right now?”

"Not really. I still have twenty minutes left," Ron said.

“I have to go get the Spectre’s prescription. The pharmacy cupboard should be free,” Hermione said firmly.

Ron hummed. “Then, I’m free too.”

Hermione’s lips curled into a grin. “Great. Let’s...talk.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Merlin, this is good,” Ron groaned as kissed his way down Hermione’s neck. “This. Was. A. Good. Idea. Best talk we’ve ever had.”

He punctuated each word with a suck against Hermione's skin, her Healer robe having fallen to their feet already. Hermione moaned at the feeling of his teeth nipping at the sensitive skin of her collarbone. Her nails dragged over his back and she clung to him, hooking her leg around the back of his thigh, jerking him closer to the junction of her thighs. Ron seemed to get the message, rolling his hips against her.

“I…” she panted. “I only come up with good ideas.”

“Cause, you’re fucking brilliant,” Ron breathed into her neck as he sucked bruises into her skin. He pulled back to look her in her eye. “Will you let me go down on you?”

Hermione’s entire world stopped turning on its axis.

No one had ever asked her that question before.

And it’s not like she hadn’t had sex. She had had sex. Not often, of course. Her first time had been with a Muggle boy that lived down the street from her with a sweet smile and bright hazel eyes. And then, she had had sex every now and then. She had sucked cock and, on one memorable occasion, eaten ass, but no one had ever gone down on *her*.

“I…I…” Hermione stammered.

Ron grinned as if he knew. “I want to go on you.”

“In the broom cupboard?” she squawked.

“No. Soon. In your bed,” Ron said firmly. He looked her right in the eye, tilting her head up. “I really like to eat out pussy.”

I really like to eat out pussy.

I really like to eat out pussy.

I really like to eat out pussy.

“No man in the history of our species has ever said that,” Hermione said *stupidly*, because obviously, someone had before, but really, it was that no man had ever said that to her.

“Will you let me?” he asked.

“Merlin, kiss me,” Hermione stammered, pulling him down for a snog so that she didn’t have to answer. Ron grinned into her mouth as she devoured him, eagerly, her hands running through his hair, down his back.

Ron wrapped one arm around her waist, tugging her closer up his body, the other hand going towards her back. Hermione mewled into his mouth in surprise when he unclipped her bra with one hand, his hand stroking her bare back. Hermione pulled back to breathe, shoving his unbuttoned robes further down to reveal his chest. Merlin, he was pale.

He was...*normal*-looking, compared to McLaggen. McLaggen had been muscular to a fault, just like she expected from a junior Auror. But, Ron was gangly and pale with no muscle mass, and fuck, but when did she start finding that so damn *sexy*?

“I want to ride you until we die,” she said so seriously that Ron had to take a minute to process.

“That’s the fucking spirit.”

And then, he slammed her into the wall again, licking into her mouth and Hermione’s fingers raked red marks down his belly as she fumbled with the button of his pants. Just as she was about to reach her hand, into his pants, the door flew open with a slam. Hermione and Ron nearly threw themselves to the ground in an effort to separate.

Neville stood in the doorway, open-mouthed. He nearly dropped the little basket of potions—no doubt to restock the pharmacy. He looked between the two of them. He turned around once, exited, and then, re-entered, as if to make sure that he had walked into the right room.

The silence felt like a million years. Slowly—ever so slowly, as if she were trying not to spook a baby deer—Hermione reached behind her and clipped her bra back into place. Neville winced at the sound of the hooks sliding into place.

“Neville, mate…” Ron began.

Neville blinked. “Nope. Big nope.”

And he walked right back out, the door swinging shut behind him.

Hermione and Ron turned back to one another, and were interrupted once more by a flood of red sparks. Ron stepped back, looking down at his wand.

“Fuck, I’ve gotta go,” Ron muttered.

Panicked, Hermione asked, “What about Neville?”

“We can deal with Neville at home,” Ron said as he pulled his robe back over his shoulders. Hermione waved her wand, and all of his buttons came together in ten seconds. He leaned forward, giving her a quick peck on the lips. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Let’s talk later,” Hermione said.

“Talk?” Ron asked, with a wink as he pushed open the door.

"Ha ha," she said, not a single hint of amusement in her voice. "No, arsehole. Actually, talk."

He saluted briefly and then, he took off, sprinting.

Hermione sighed as she pulled her robes back on.

Merlin, Ron was annoying.

And she was besotted.

DIAGNOSIS

The Calderon Healing Conference was being held in New York City for the first time in fifteen years, and the British Healers were reminded once more about why that was. Tom sneered as he heard the crass, harsh New York accents filling the conference center.

It was quite nice with high glass ceilings, and it was located in Chelsea—another name that the uncouth Americans had stolen from the proper English—, but it was loud and crowded, and really, Tom wanted to be back in his very nice hotel suite that he had harassed Dumbledore into getting for him.

“Is there anything you’re looking forward to in particular?” Vance asked, looking through the pamphlet. She paused as she went down the list of speakers, and looked up at Tom with wide eyes. “Is Lily Evans really giving the keynote speech?”

“Why do you think Snape is here?” Tom snorted, gesturing vaguely to the man that was a few meters ahead of them, staring around, looking akin to a great, greasy bat for all the world to see. Snape seemed to feel their stares and he glowered over his shoulder.

As Snape stomped over to them, Tom saw the very woman that the man had been looking for appear behind him, tucking her dark red hair behind her ear. She looked winded by her International Portkey, and would probably be quite Portkey-lagged by the time she gave her presentation, but she looked every inch the bitch that she was. The longer that Tom looked at Lily, the more Harry seemed to both resemble her and be nothing like her at all.

He decided not to think too deeply about that.

“Sev! Vance.” Lily’s eyes narrowed on Tom. “Riddle.”

“Evans,” Tom returned just as nastily.

They stood in front of one another, glowering at each other with the vitriol that could only be found between two medical professional rivals that had found out that one was fucking the other’s son.

“Lily. Lily, would you like to attend lunch?” Snape asked.

Merlin, the man was like a fucking whining child.

“Snape, she’s never going to want you. Get over it,” Tom said coolly, never breaking eye contact with Lily. He expected that to make her at least twitch, but all he achieved was Snape’s embarrassed and enraged spluttering.

“This is...awkward,” Vance drawled. Both Tom and Lily turned to look at her, plainly. Vance flushed. “Isn’t...this awkward?”

“No, Vance. Why would this be awkward?” Lily asked, emotionless. Merlin, she was like stone. Tom didn’t know how she managed to give birth to the lovely, but overly emotional, creature that was Harry Potter.

“Because he...and your son…” Vance trailed away.

“Lily, I filed a complaint with Human Resources, if you’d like to know. I thought it entirely inappropriate. Riddle should be fired,” Snape said quite unhelpfully.

Lily blinked once. Then, twice.

“My son is an adult. He can do as he wishes,” Lily said. She said it like it was something that had been drilled into her by weeks of therapy. Good. Lily Evans needed therapy.

“But, Riddle—” Snape began.

Gave Harry Potter the best time of his life multiple times a night.

“You heard her. We’re both adults,” Tom said coolly. “It’s a non-issue.”

“Oh, yes. It is. Our only issue is that, apparently, I’ve damaged my son with my negligence and callousness,” Lily said and then, a terrifyingly brilliant smile spread across her face. “But, I’ve been told—by him—that our relationship can mend. I mean, it’s not as if I lied to him, humiliated him, and broke his heart.”

A beat of silence.

Tom grounded his teeth together. “Touche.”

Lily laughed, long and harsh. It was a grating sound.

“Come on, Sev. Let’s grab lunch,” she said and she strutted away, her little lapdog on her heels.

Vance cleared her throat.

“What?” Tom growled.

“Someone call the Aurors because I’ve just witnessed a murder,” Vance breathed, staring after Lily with a glint of awe in her eyes. She flushed when she seemed to realize what she said. “Oh. Uh. Sorry. I can go…”

“No,” Tom barked. “We’re getting tea. None of this swill they call coffee.”

If Lily got to have a posse, so did he.

DIAGNOSIS

Draco’s good mood fell flat the moment he saw a pair of redheaded freckled demons. They were both wailing, one covered in blood—which, good for Draco, not so good for the bloody man—and the other was clutching at him, dramatically, falling all over himself. Draco sighed as observed the matrons flurrying around them, attempting to get a Calming Draught down both of their throats. Draco immediately waved his wand, Summoning backup.

There was something familiar about the stocky twins, with their long noses and freckles.

Draco heard Weasley before he saw him.

Weasley rushed forward, straightening out his robes.

“What’re you Summoning me for, Malfoy? I’m on my break,” Weasley snapped.

Draco gave him a dull look. They were trainees. In France, they didn’t *get* breaks.

“I believe *they* belong to you,” Draco drawled, distaste in the curl of his thin lips.

Weasley looked towards where Draco was gesturing and he paled.

“Fred! George!” he shouted, dashing to their side. Draco followed after him. After all, E&T was *his* as much as it was Weasley’s, and if the case looked interesting, Draco would claim it. He saw the bloody man first. “Fred, what happened to George? Come on!”

"W-we...I-I...w-what?" Fred stammered, clinging to George's shoulder. He dropped his hand, the one full of blood-soaked gauze that had been pressed to George's head.

Draco's eyes widened in wonder as he examined the injury. George Weasley was missing an *ear*, a bloody eerie mess left of it. Draco could practically feel the magic radiating from it—so that meant it couldn't be grown back, only patched over. Oh, it would be a messy bit of work, and Draco was practically salivating at the idea of taking it on.

George Weasley moaned as he came to.

"H-how are you feeling?" Fred demanded.

"S-Saintlike," George stammered, weak and pale under his freckles. "G-get it, Fred? I-I'm hole-y."

Fred let out a weak laugh and George laughed too. Weasley was not laughing.

"What the *fuck* happened?" he barked.

Fred seemed to fall into hysterics again as he recounted the incident. "W-we were experimenting in the backroom! I-it was lunchtime, so the shop was closed. And something...calculations were wrong and he was too close to the explosion and it was all my fault! All my fault!"

Draco winced as his hysterics echoed through the E&T area. Soon Fred would be disrupting the other patients and cause everyone else to fall into a mess. Draco pushed Weasley out of the way and kneeled in front of Fred, pointing his wand at him.

"Look at me," Draco barked. Fred stared around, wild-eyed, hyperventilating loudly. The more panicked he became, the more stressed George became, blood flowing easier than before. Weasley seemed shocked by it, too shocked to move. "Me. Look at me!"

"What?" Fred gasped through his panicked sobs.

"*Legilimens*."

Immediately, Fred fell silent, his eyes glazed over. He stared into Draco's eyes, unmoving.

"What did you do?" Weasley demanded, furious.

"Don't touch me," Draco barked. He could feel Weasley's hand hovering over her shoulder. "You're letting your brother bleed out. Stop the bleeding."

Weasley twitched once, and then, he flew into action. He cast the diagnostics charm.

"Yeah, magical wound to the right side of the cranium. Stress to the nervous system from the trauma," Weasley rattled out. He waved his wand, Summoning a fresh wrap of gauze and dittany to his side. "I'll need to admit him. He won't have an ear, but this will be quick."

Weasley went to apply the dittany and Draco held up a hand.

"You can't treat him. I'll do it. Step away," he said, his voice so calm that it rattled Weasley.

He still hadn't broken eye contact with Fred, breathing slowly until Fred's breathing even with his own.

"What do you mean? Why? And what are you doing to my brother, using Legilimency?"

"He was panicking. It put stress on your brother. I am keeping him calm. How is George?" Draco asked.

"He's losing blood. Let me Heal him," Ron snarled.

Draco hummed. "Okay. I need you to stand in front of Fred and talk very calmly and softly to him while I work on your brother."

"What are you *doing*?" Weasley said, working himself up. "He's *bleeding.*"

"This is why we do not Heal family members. You're working yourself up, and he's *awake* to hear you," Draco murmured and then, he turned sharply, reaching out with a strong hand to grab George's chin, ignoring the blood-slicked skin. He looked deep into George's eyes, and whispered, "*Dormio.*"

Immediately, George's eyes snapped shut and he fell back. The change was immediate. The blood began to flow more sluggishly as George's heart stopped working as fast, his entire musculature relaxing.

"Whoa...what?" Weasley rasped.

Draco looked back at Weasley, eyes narrowed. "Can you work on him now? Are you calm enough?"

"Y-yes," Weasley said, still looking ruffled. "It was...a lot."

"Heal him," Draco said softly. "I won't tell anyone that you did it."

Weasley immediately began to work, applying dittany to the hellish wound. He looked up at Draco, mildly suspicious as he glanced from his brothers to Draco. Draco knew what he must look like—calmer than Weasley had ever seen. None of Draco's usual neuroses or histrionics. Just an utter calm. Astoria had been shocked the first time too.

"What do you want in return?" Weasley snapped.

"We both get listed as Head Healer on this case," Draco said coolly. "I did half the work."

Weasley hummed. "What...what was it that you actually *did*? Or, rather, doing?"

"I am using Legilimency to keep your brothers calm. I used it on Fred to stop his panicking by suppressing his brain's natural function for breathing and matching to my own. I used it on George to suppress his central nervous system."

Weasley paused. "You mean he has no *brain* function, right now?" he snarled, working himself up again.

“Not...quite,” Draco said, taking a deep breath to stop himself from getting angry and setting everyone into a frenzy again. “It’s more of a trance. It’s easier on the body and the mind. Coma and stasis spells repress the magical core, killing the connection. That puts stress on the body. He was already under stress from the trauma and his brother's reaction. He might have gone into shock. I have stilled his mind. This is easier."

Weasley looked impressed. Draco suppressed his smugness for now. He could feel it later.

“How did you learn that? Lily?” Weasley asked.

Draco snorted. “No. There’s a reason I didn’t grow up with my father, Weasley. He was unkind. My memories of him are not fond. My mother used these techniques to calm me as a child,” Draco said. He paused, tilting his head as he recounted the words that had just emerged from his mouth. “Hm. Joining with two minds and suppressing them means I have to be in control of my body. It also makes it very difficult to lie.”

“I...I see,” Weasley whispered. He swallowed hard, and grudgingly muttered, “Thanks.”

Draco shook his head.

“We are Healers. This is what we do. I do not like you. I took an oath. An oath that I believe is sacred. I would not break it.”

Neither young man noticed a pair of impressed, electric blue eyes.

DIAGNOSIS

"The greenhouse is so awesome. It's warm and sunny and I feel like I'm in the middle of a forest. How have I never been here?" Harry asked as he reclined on the bench next to Neville, who was kneeling in the dirt, carefully replanting a Shrivelfig plant in new dragon dung compost.

“You’re too busy being glamorous and flashy in magical theatres,” Neville said with a tiny smile.

"Hey!" Harry whined.

Harry scrambled to lie on his side, looking down at Neville carefully. Neville was wearing a pair of thick dragonhide gloves and treated the plant with an amount of care that Harry had *never* put in when he had taken Herbology. Even the way Neville pruned was done with a deliberateness that Harry could only pull off in a magical theatre. Neville’s touch alone seemed to make the plant perk up. Neville paused and looked up, an odd smile on his face.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re just...you’re really good at that, aren’t you?” Harry asked in wonder.

Neville's cheeks turned pink. "I've been told."

"How did you realize you were good at it?" Harry asked.

Neville set his shears down and sat down cross-legged, ignored the dirt staining his robes.

"When I was a kid, my mum and dad worked," Neville said.

"Like mine," Harry said.

Neville frowned. "Well, maybe not that often, then. No, Mum is a hit wizard so she was only deployed when she needed to be, which wasn't *really* often. But, when she came back from wherever, she always brought home a new plant or seeds for me. I like to plant with my Gran. She lives in the family home and they have this enormous garden in the back. And I just...found out I had a bit of a green wand."

"This seems like more than a green wand, Nev," Harry said. The plant was bending *towards* him.

Neville shrugged, as if it weren't a big deal. "I really like plants. They like me."

Harry was silent for a long moment before he looked down at Neville again.

"Hey, Neville. Remember that thing I said we would never speak about again?" Harry asked softly.

Neville's face did three things just then—he frowned, then flushed, splotchy and ugly, and then, his lips curled into an amused little smile.

"Yeah. Are we talking about that?"

"Well, no. I'm just...thanking you. For not talking about it. And not...doing anything," Harry sighed. "Because guys...guys who aren't good, guys who aren't you, would have. They have. Before. To me. Seen me weak and slutty and then, I...I end up having my little sister wash dry cum out of my hair, because I'm a bit of a slut—"

"Don't call yourself that," Neville snapped.

Harry scoffed. "Whatever, Neville. I'm not going to hide what I was. It was only really bad my fifth year. Sucked cock like I was born for it or whatever. Then, I found Theo my sixth and half of seventh year, so I was...I wasn't *okay*, but I was fine, or whatever. But, I'm just saying thanks. For being a good guy."

"I'm your friend, Harry. Your family," Neville sighed. "Of course."

"Yeah, you are. You're the best. You all are the best. You make me wanna be *better* and—" Harry explained, and then, before he could articulate all of the icky, twisting emotions that made him regurgitate his *feelings*, like a bloody Hufflepuff, an explosion of red sparks emerged from his wand and he paled. "Oh...*oh*, Katie."

And then he hopped off the bench and took off running from the greenhouse, sprinting down the long hallway. Harry barely registered the pounding of footsteps behind him as he crashed into the stairwell, taking the steps up two at a time, his wand held outward. He flew out onto the Spell Damage floor.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" he roared as he slammed into a crowd of visitors who hopped out of the way, cursing and shouting before they realized who he was.

Harry's heart stopped when he saw the crowd of matrons hovering by Katie Bell's room and he pushed his way through the gathered witches and wizards. Katie was strapped down to the bed, seizing and thrashing against her magical restraints, foam bubbling from her lips. Her hair was floating above her, as if she were attempting to rise off the bed.

"What's happening?" Harry barked.

The matron that seemed to have called him looked at him, wide-eyed. "We were checking her levels like you asked, on the hour, and suddenly, she started reacting poorly to the medication that Healer Riddle prescribed."

"It's not supposed to be long-acting," Harry said firmly. He stepped forward, waving his wand and casting the diagnostics charm. He winced. The as of yet still unidentified curse was working its way through her nervous system, disrupting it painfully. He decided to anesthetize her. It wouldn't last long, but it would be enough to get her down to the theatre. "*Moudiasménos*. Take her to the magical theatre. I'm opening her up. Please have her on her stomach."

"What?" the matron asked, wide-eyed. "Did Healer Riddle authorize—"

"Do you see Healer Riddle here?" Harry snarled. He looked at the older matron—she was familiar. Suddenly, he recognized her as the matron that had been in the theatre the last two times that he had operated with Tom. "Matron. You're his theatre matron. What's your name?"

"Miriam Strout. We'll prepare the theatre for you, immediately. Would you like me to assist?" Matron Strout asked.

"Absolutely. I'll see you down there," Harry said. He cast one more glance at Katie—her eyes were wide open, wide with terror and pain, and then, he exited the room, pushing past everyone. At least she wasn't seizing anymore.

Neville was waiting in the hallway, wide-eyed. "What's going on?" he whispered.

"I'm going to open her up. Tom and I haven't developed a cure yet, so she's on a treatment plan to manage symptoms. The curse was working her muscles, atrophying them painfully. Now, it's frying her circulatory system. We don't...we don't know what the curse is. So, I have to open her blind," Harry said as calmly as possible.

Neville's eyes grew rounder and rounder the longer Harry spoke. He looked over Harry's shoulder and watched as the matrons floated Katie out, briskly moving down the hallway

towards the lift.

“That’s...that’s insanity, Harry,” Neville whispered.

“Oh, I know. I...I’m going to kill my patient. And Tom is going to hate me. This is wonderful,” Harry said with a false smile. “Excuse me.”

Neville reached out as Harry tried to walk past, snagging his wrist in a tight grip. “Nope. You’re not going to kill Katie Bell. You’re going to save her. Until Riddle comes back and no doubt comes up with something brilliant for whatever your project is,” Neville said firmly. “Because you’re brilliant. Merlin, I can’t believe you still have to be told.”

“I’ve never done this by myself. I’m brilliant when I have my teacher. But, I’m by myself. And no one knows her case, but me. So...it has to be me. It can only be me,” Harry said and he pulled away from Neville, walking down the hall.

He felt like he was floating as he thundered down the steps. Harry didn’t hear Neville following after him anymore.

Harry stopped outside of the theatre doors and pressed his hands against the door. He swallowed back his doubt.

“I’m Harry fucking Potter. I’m the best damn Healer here,” Harry whispered to himself. “You stand between this girl and death. Get your shit together.”

He closed his eyes for three seconds and then threw the doors open, wand out.

Matron Strout and the younger matron both waited by the patient who was well into her stasis charm.

“The patient is ready, sir,” the younger matron said.

Harry nodded. He felt that thrill, the rush that he always felt when he entered the theatre. So, it wasn't Tom's presence that made him feel like a live wire. That was the magic. The Healing.

Good to know.

Harry began the ceremony of it all.

“It’s a beautiful day—” and Harry stopped. He frowned, ignoring the expectant look on the matrons’ faces. He turned around, watching them with careful eyes. “That’s not going to be my thing.”

“I’m sorry, Healer?” Matron Strout asked, and wasn’t *that* a thrill?

She had called him *Healer.*"I'm not going to have a catchphrase. Someone get me a radio!" Harry called out.

He rolled up his sleeves as the younger matron rushed out of the room to do as he commanded. Harry glanced up at the gallery. Neville stood, staring down at him, and Harry's lips curled into a tiny smile when he saw Ron and Hermione standing on either side of him. Hermione nodded at him and she pressed her fist to the glass. Harry took a deep breath and lifted his fist above his head. Hermione nodded again and Harry turned back towards the doors as the matron rushed back in, holding an old radio to her chest.

"This is all I could find, Healer," the matron said.

Harry nodded. "Of course. Thank you," Harry said, and he took a deep breath as she settled it on the tray. He tapped his wand against it, slowly turning the knob to tune in to a Muggle oldie's channel.

"*Loving you isn't the right thing to do.*

How can I ever change things that I feel?

If I could, baby, I'd give you my world.

How can I, when you won't take it from me?"

Fleetwood Mac. Good. It felt like Lavender was here with him. Lily was here with him.

They'd expect nothing less than flawlessness.

"*You can go your own way.*"

He could deliver. He touched the tip of his wand to the base of her neck. One plan: contain the curse to a single point.

"Okay. Let's get started," Harry announced with a grin. "*Diffindo!*"

Chapter End Notes

Guys! I came up with a storyline for Neville! And it's cute, instead of traumatic/dramatic like everyone else's, because Neville deserves all the nice things. I decided Neville's gonna make a new friend!

Also, I almost had no Tom again, but even I was going through withdrawal. So, here's some Tom. Promise that next chapter will START with Tom and Harry talking.

Also, sorry that it's been so long. I'll try to have another chapter up in a couple days to make up for it.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It was amazing. I’ve never...it was...*Tom*,” Harry rasped, his voice cracking, as he vibrated with excitement. Tom was nodding, staring at him with the softest eyes that Harry had ever seen. Harry closed his eyes, shaking his head. “I saw the curse. It was like...pus on her muscles. And I gathered it and isolated it by drying it out. It’s at the base of her spine now. She can’t walk for now, but once we eradicate the curse, we can get her into physical therapy to correct that. And I did it by myself.”

Tom hummed, watching him carefully. “All by yourself,” he whispered.

Harry knew the man was probably slightly Portkey-lagged. It was late and Harry had just shown up to his home as soon as he was sure that the man was back from the conference because he needed to tell him all about the procedure. He had to tell him about Katie Bell and how it had felt to be in that theatre all alone. How it felt to ease her pain. Tom hadn’t even asked why he was there, simply opening the door wider to let him in.

But, the way Tom was staring at him was not like he was *tired*, exactly.

“What are you thinking?” Harry said, biting his bottom lip raw in his anxiety. Tom was staring at him as if he had never seen him before.

The older man reached forward, brushing his fingers through Harry’s hair.

“Just...you’re remarkable, darling.”

Darling.

That was new. Harry closed his eyes, looking away. When he opened them again, Tom was standing above him, and his hand was right in Harry’s face. Harry craned his neck to look up at the man. Tom was smiling at him. It was a real smile, not his arrogant smirks.

“What?” Harry whispered.

“Dance with me.”

And Harry knew this was against the rules. He knew that he would regret it, but instead, he let Tom wave his wand and the record player turned on. Harry swallowed, his lashes fluttering. The low, sensual funk beat didn’t sound like any of the vinyls that Harry had poached in his youth. It didn’t sound like anything that he would expect Tom to listen to either.

Harry looked at the hand and took it.

Tom pulled him off the floor and pulled Harry close, his other hand sliding to Harry's waist. Harry pressed his free hand to Tom's bicep and they slowly danced, staring at one another.

“What are we doing, Tom?” Harry asked, quietly.

“Dancing,” Tom murmured, just as soft, his voice nearly lost to the music. “Two friends dancing.”

“This is what friends do?” Harry whispered, his voice cracking.

Tom’s hand slid around his waist and pressed into the small of his back, pulling him closer. Harry gasped as they were pressed together again and his own hand drifted up, fingers twining into the curls at the nape of Tom's neck. He had always liked the small hairs there, loved to play with them. Harry loved Tom's hair in general. He remembered how Tom liked his hair being pulled, sometimes, when they were fucking, and Harry swallowed his whimper as they moved.

He hid his face in the taller man’s shoulder.

“I want you,” Harry confessed into the fabric covering Tom’s shoulder.

Tom’s hand tightened on the small of his back.

“I can’t have you,” Tom whispered into Harry’s hair.

“I won’t tell,” Harry said.

And he felt so small and terrible, clinging to this man that wanted him, but didn’t want him enough.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re going to ruin me,” Tom said quietly.

Harry stared up at him with wide eyes. “I haven’t even done anything,” he said quietly. “I wasn’t the one—”

“I forget how young you are, sometimes,” Tom said and he laughed quietly into Harry’s hair. His lips trailed along Harry’s hairline, into his hair, the soft pressure of a kiss to the crown of Harry’s head and then he was tucking Harry’s head under his chin again.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry muttered against Tom’s shoulder.

“There are so many ways to ruin a person, darling.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my *God*.”

A flash of red hair appeared from beneath her sheets and Hermione's fingers tightened in the sheets as she tried to control her shaking. Ron grinned at her, his lips still lick with wetness and he tilted his head.

"Just Ron is fine."

Hermione groaned, knotting her fingers in his hair. She pushed him back down. Ron slithered down gladly, lapping at her folds. In another world, Hermione might have been embarrassed by how wet and swollen she was. She would've tried to muffle her cries of pleasure, but that was a world where she hadn't cum twice in less than fifteen minutes.

That was a world that was behind her now.

Ron licked slow and carefully, as if she were a feast and *Merlin*, Hermione could just *die*. She squirmed, her thighs clamped tight on either side of Ron's head and her back arched like a bow when he suddenly fucked his tongue into her, as deep as he could. Hermione keened, loud and high and the hand that wasn't buried in Ron's hair flew back, slamming into her headboard as she tried to find purchase.

"Merlin...so good...so good...only thing you're good at…" Hermione panted, trying to ground herself again before she came so hard that she squirted on his tongue.

She had cum that way once and she didn't want that to happen on his fucking face.

Ron looked up at her again, rolling his eyes.

"How can you be such a caustic hag when I have literally made you cum three times in the past half-hour?" Ron asked blandly.

Hermione snorted as she caught her breath. She whimpered when he turned his head to the side, sucking a mark into her inner thighs, worshipping her. She would feel that for days. Merlin, she *wanted* to feel it for days.

"You...you've only made me cum twice," Hermione hissed.

Ron snorted. "My mistake. Just give me thirty more sec—"

"HERMIONE! HERMIONE, WHERE ARE YOU?"

They only had ten seconds to react. Ron was already out of the bed, his freckled arse flashing as he ran into her bathroom, throwing the door shut behind him just as Hermione jerked her duvet up to cover her naked body. The door flew open with a crash and Harry looked at her, wild-eyed and excited.

"H-hello, Harry," Hermione said shakily, brushing one frizzy curl from her forehead.

Fuck, she'd have to wash her hair again.

Harry's nose wrinkled. "It smells like sex in here. Have you been having sex?"

“Do you see anyone else in here?” Hermione drawled. Even as she said the words, she reached for her wand on the side table and winced when she felt two wands where there should only be one. Carefully, as she picked up her own wand, she knocked Ron’s to the floor, hoping that it would roll somewhere helpful, like under her bed.

She waved her wand, opening the windows to air out the sex stench.

“Have you been masturbating?” Harry asked. He paused, looking her up and down. “You look like you’ve just orgasmed. Good for you. Wait...did I interrupt your masturbation session?”

Hermione groaned, her head falling back into her pulls.

“Fucking hell, Harry, it wouldn’t really matter now, now would it?” Hermione demanded. “The mood is gone.”

And just when she’d been promised a third orgasm.

“Okay, good. I need you,” Harry said firmly. He made to sit on her bed and then cringed, thinking better of it. “But, I’m going to stand and make this short because I have a feeling that you’re naked under that blanket.”

“It’s a duvet. And I am.”

“Ew.”

Hermione groaned. “What do you want, Harry?”

“Oh, right. So...I was at Tom’s—”

“Wait. Why?” Hermione asked suspiciously. Then, she collapsed back against her pillows, groaning. “Don’t tell me you’re sleeping with him again.”

“I’m not!” Harry snarled. Then, he softened as he thought about the series of events that had sent him running from Tom’s flat and back to Grimmauld Place. “I was telling him about Katie Bell. And then, he...we danced and it...nevermind.”

Because suddenly, it felt secret and private, and not for anyone but himself and Tom.

“Why? Harry?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Nothing. It just feels...private,” Harry said softly. He backed away towards the door, fighting the smile that was threatening to spread over his face. He felt like a little boy with a crush—giddy and smiley and so light that he could float on air. “I’ll let you get back to your orgasming. Maybe that’ll help you unwind.”

Hermione flipped Harry the bird as the man backed out of the room. The door shut behind him, and Hermione didn’t have to wait long for her bathroom door to open. Ron was standing there, naked, and Hermione decided to objective him for just a little bit.

“Well, is that how you guys are in private?” Ron asked. “Gossip like a bunch of old maids?”

Hermione snorted in laughter and she shook her head. “Shut up. Get over here,” she said with a smile, holding out her hand.

Ron ran towards the bed, jumping down on it, ignoring her shrieks. He rolled on top of her, pinning her down under her covers, smiling down at her. Hermione tried not to smile back, but she couldn’t help it.

“You want me to finish down there?” Ron asked.

Hermione shook her head, slowly. “No. Just...kiss me.”

DIAGNOSIS

“How are you feeling this morning?” Harry smirked as he danced into the kitchen, sitting down at the breakfast table as Hermione scrambled up a vegetable egg concoction that was always really quite good, though Harry loathed mushrooms with a passion.

“Well rested,” Hermione said primly.

Harry snorted and he sat down at the table, leaning back in the chair. “Ron and Neville aren’t up?”

“I am,” Ron called as he pushed the swinging door open. “Neville is shaving.”

“Neville has to *shave*?” Harry demanded.

“Yes? Because he’s a grown man?” Ron asked, frowning at Harry as he went to make toast. “How many pieces of toast do you want?”

“Three. And *I* don’t have to shave very often,” Harry said.

“Shocker.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You sound so shrill this morning, Harry. Please. What is *wrong* with you? You’ve always got some issue. What is *wrong*? It's five in the bloody morning. We have a forty-eight-hour shift that we start in forty-five minutes. What is the whining for?" Hermione asked, utterly exhausted as she spooned the food onto a platter and Ron waited for the toaster to go off.

Harry gaped, offended.

“*Nothing*. I just—”

“Enough. Enough. Enough with the talking,” Hermione snapped.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I guess someone did have as many orgasms as she should have yesterday.”

Ron choked over the air for some inexplicable reason.

“No, I’m just very tired and *very* stressed, Harry,” Hermione hissed. “I have my first procedure with Vance tonight—”

“You’ve operated on my sister,” Harry pointed out.

Hermione huffed. “First official as her student. I don’t...I need her to know that I’m worth it,” Hermione said, her voice cracking.

“But, she can’t give you up. You already did the—you know,” Harry said, looking at Ron in a very suspicious way.

"I already know. She traded me. This conversation has been had," Ron said, his voice flat.

“Ron!” Hermione squawked.

“Wait. Really? Are you two...y’know?” Harry asked, too bright-eyed for five in the morning.

“Nope,” they said in an eerie unison.

Harry pursed his lips, suspicious, but before he could contest their words, the door swung open and Neville stumbled in, rubbing at his sleep-pink face. Almost blindly, he pushed past Ron, grabbed two pieces of toast and sat at the table, spooning the vegetable egg scramble onto his plate. Harry scoffed and did the same, getting into his food.

“That toast was mine,” Ron said with a scowl.

“Mine, now,” Neville muttered.

Hermione smirked as she finished pouring out four enormous travel cups of black coffee. She waved her wand and the travel cups zoomed into the possession of their respective owners.

"It's Black Cat Flu season. Get vaccinated," Harry warned through a mouthful of the scramble.

“Ugh, don’t talk with your mouth full,” Ron chastised.

Everyone paused to stare at him in disbelief. Harry slowly swallowed and huffed.

“Get vaccinated. Take your potions. Don’t be idiots. You *will* be quarantined in the attic, and that’s where Sirius stores the house elf heads,” Harry snapped.

“Yeah, yeah,” Neville muttered after a long sip of coffee.

Hermione frowned. “Your godfather has *house elves*? Slaves?” Hermione demanded.

Harry shrugged. “Purebloods. They’re freaks.”

“I resent that,” Ron and Neville chorused.

“You two are *especially* freaks," Hermione said playfully. She sat down at the table and smirked at them.

“How so?” Neville asked.

Hermione smirked. “For hanging out with *us*.”

DIAGNOSIS

Ron yawned as he followed Rodolphus and Bellatrix through the hall, his coffee cup clutched tight against his chest. Four hours into his shift and he was already exhausted. It was only half-past ten and he wanted to collapse in an on-call room.

“He’s already learned the basics. Clinical training requires practical application, Rodolphus,” Bellatrix sneered, adjusting her plague doctor mask on the top of her head. Rodolphus had his own mask tucked under his arm.

“He took Healing at Hogwarts. We both know that it doesn’t focus nearly as much on Emergency & Triage as it should. It’s naturally skewed towards Spell Damage specialists and Mind Healing specialists—the two *flashiest* professions,” Rodolphus said snippily. “He should relearn the basics. From the very beginning.”

Bellatrix scoffed, shaking her head. “I’m not going to waste my time with that. He knows how the Bandage Spell. He knows how to cauterize a wound.”

“Doesn’t mean that he didn’t want to be a Spell Damage specialist when he got here,” Rodolphus said with a sneer. “E&T isn’t about being pretty. You use what you’ve got where and when you’ve got it. Weasley!”

Ron jumped, nearly spilling black coffee all over his hand.

“Yes, sir?” he asked, yawning into his chest. He tried to run a free hand through his hair before he realized his other hand was full of parchment files and he only succeeded in smacking himself in the forehead.

“What did you want to be before you declared E&T?” Rodolphus barked.

“Spell Damage. Then, I met Harry Potter and thought...why bother?” Ron admitted.

Bloody hell, he was honest when he was tired.

Rodolphus glanced at Bellatrix, knowingly. Bellatrix's mood had only blackened at the reminder of her romantic rival.

"Harry Potter *this* and Harry Potter *that*. Can we maybe *not* talk about the Golden Boy?" Bellatrix snarled.

"Is that bitterness I sense? Are you *bitter*?" Rodolphus mocked.

Bellatrix growled, gnashing her teeth, before she turned back to Ron, expectant.

"Weasley, unknown patient arrives, age 24, lacerations to the back and thighs. What do you do?" Bellatrix said immediately.

"Diagnostics spell and—presuming the wounds weren't made by Dark magic—bandage spell. If it's a life-threatening laceration, cauterize, and move on," Weasley said.

"Same thing for a werewolf victim," Rodolphus barked.

"Same process. If bitten by a fully-transformed werewolf, apply a mixture of dittany and powdered silver to seal wound. Immediately order a prescription of the Lycanthropy Potion from the pharmacy after transfer is complete," Ron said.

He smirked. These were pretty easy.

"Patient, male, age 12, dementor contact," Bellatrix said snippily.

Ron scoffed. Easy. He'd just dealt with that.

"Chocolate will suffice."

"Oh, he's good. Not many know that one," Rodolphus said. Bellatrix looked at him, haughty and irritated—an odd, if normal, look on her face. "Multiple casualties. Centurion is down. Broken hip, broken ankle. Hit wizards are down. What do you do?"

Now, they were both watching, waiting to see if he had learned anything from the first time he was out in the field.

"Immediately summon the Aurors as backup. Start on Centurion first. Diagnostics to check for arterial injuries. Stabilize him using the Lightning Spell, directly to the chest, right over the heart. If the heart doesn't restart, begin manual compressions. If this doesn't work, put more power into the spell," Ron said. Bellatrix leaned forward to counter him and Ron lifted his coffee cup. "If *that* doesn't work, I'd crack his chest. I know it's not done, but I've read that a cardiac massage could restore circulation. Once that's stable, I'd use a bandage spell to patch him close. Then, heal the most life-threatening injuries—setting his hip and ankle, binding them in bandages. Superficial marks can wait for someone else to make him pretty. Then, I'd move on."

Rodolphus and Bellatrix were staring at him, wide-eyed.

“That was...hmm. Cardiac massage. I’ve never read about that,” Rodolphus muttered to himself.

“It’s a Muggle technique. My girlfriend is a Muggleborn. She has...Muggle books in the house,” Ron said calmly. Of course, he’d never tell Hermione that he was snooping through her book collection and that he was the one leaving grease marks on her pages.

What she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

“I should’ve known. It sounds barbaric,” Bellatrix sneered.

“But, according to Weasley, it’s effective. I’d like to do more reading,” Rodolphus muttered under his breath. He looked at Ron, curiously. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for E&T, Weasley.”

“Yes...you’re very...methodical,” Bellatrix hissed. “I would’ve thought this field was a little too challenging for the likes of you.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “I like chess. It’s a bit like that.”

“A game?” Rodolphus asked. He sounded nearly appreciative.

"Sure. But, it's not a game of chance. Chess is a game of strategy. Who survives the longest and all that. Now, the first case for rounds, ma'am," Ron said, passing Bellatrix the first parchment file.

Bellatrix’s dark eyes had a spark of interest and her purple lips curled into a smile.

“Antonin Dolohov, 53, came in yesterday for a cardiac event exacerbated by continued abuse of...deadly nightshade,” Bellatrix hummed.

“He’s *53,*” Weasley pointed out.

Bellatrix shrugged. “Ministry officials. The bureaucrats have to have their fun somehow.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Merlin, I think I’m going to die. Either from exhaustion or hunger,” Harry whimpered, collapsing on the on-call room bed. He ate the takeaway styrofoam platter of chips with a gusto that he had never quite displayed before.

That was more in Ron’s vein of behavior.

“No time for sleep,” Hermione said, looking up with exhaustion glossy brown eyes.

"Time for food though?" Ron asked as he danced through, dropping a takeaway box on her lap and then falling into Harry's bed, shoving him over so they could both happily recline on it. Harry's head dropped on Ron's shoulder and he yawned into his fellow trainee's hunter green clad shoulder. "How have your day's been?"

“Hectic!” Neville called as he walked in, his fourth cup of coffee clutched in hand. “I’m so exhausted!”

Harry winced. “Nev, why are you *yelling*? People are sleeping.”

Neville’s nose wrinkled and then he seemed to realize what was happening. He looked at his housemates, sheepish.

“I’ve been harvesting Mandrakes all day. I guess those earmuffs aren’t as good as they’re supposed to be,” Neville said apologetically. He fell down on the foot of Hermione’s bed and curled up at the end of it, glancing over at Hermione.

She was sitting at the head of the bed, cross-legged, colored parchment cards around her. Her eyes were darting around as she tried to memorize her scrawls on them.

"Are you revising for something?" Harry asked with a yawn.

“No,” Hermione said immediately.

Harry snorted. “Well, okay. What have you been up to, Ron?”

“Black and Lestrange have been arguing non-stop. About the stupidest things. Like they have differing opinions on how to train me, how the weather is, how they each take their tea. It’s ridiculous,” Ron sneered, shaking his head.

“And the patients?” Neville asked.

Ron shrugged. “Oh. That’s fine. We haven’t had any real emergency calls. It’s not really fun if someone’s not bleeding out in the middle of the street.”

Hermione scoffed.

“Charming.”

“Aren’t I?” Ron returned just as quickly.

Hermione looked up and grinned, shaking her head for a moment, before she looked back down at work. Harry waggled his eyebrows at Ron and Ron laughed, just elbowing him in his side.

“What about you, Harry?” Neville asked.

Harry hummed. “I’ve been running errands for Tom. I did all of his work-ups, followed up on his patients, and then, after a nap and lunch, I’m going to do research.”

“How long is your break? I’ve got to be back by two,” Ron said through a mouthful of a roast beef sandwich.

“I don’t know. Generally, he just lets me sleep and if he needs me, he Summons? I’m really tired so I’ll nap until three, I guess,” Harry said with a shrug.

“You’re bloody lucky that your boss wants to shag you,” Ron said.

Neville rolled his eyes. “Ron, really?”

“Well, he does. He’s still bloody obsessed with you,” Ron returned and Harry scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest, petulantly.

“Not enough if the Gorsemoor Grant matters more than *me*,” Harry said stiffly.

Ron barked out a laugh. “I’d trade you for the Gorsemoor Grant too, mate.”

Harry flipped him the bird.

“You’ve zero tact,” Hermione said without looking up from his flashcards.

"Oh, you're one to talk," Ron challenged. He leaped out of bed and sauntered over to Hermione's bedside. Hermione tried to swat him away, hoarding her flashcards closer to her body. "Oh...are you *serious*?”

Harry perked up. “What is it?”

"It's OWL notes! For Care of Magical Creatures," Ron barked out a laugh. "Why are you learning fifth-year material?"

Harry jumped up from the bed, moving to get a closer look. “And why is it all in my sister’s handwriting? Did you owl my sister asking for her *OWL* notes?”

“Didn’t you take Care of Magical Creatures?” Neville asked curiously.

Hermione made a haughty sound in the back of her throat. “I’ll have you know that I did not.”

All three of her housemates blanched.

“Are you serious? It was literally the easiest OWL. I didn’t even study and got an O,” Ron pointed out, eyes wide and mad. Hermione shoved him away and began to reorganize Lavender’s notes. She cleared her throat.

“I was too busy taking Arithmancy and Alchemy to fit Care into my schedule,” Hermione said primly.

“Literally how?” Harry asked, rolling his eyes. “I took Arithmancy too and my ex took Alchemy. It didn’t conflict with either of our classes.”

Neville leaned forward, wide-eyed. “Wait...are you just *not good* at Care?”

The three boys broke into a fresh round of laughter was immediately hushed in the on-call room. They all winced, trying to stifle their fits of giggles. Hermione stared at them all, affronted.

“I was *fine*. At the theory. It’s just the...practical that I...I don’t like *animals*. Merlin, shut up!”

“Hermione didn’t take Care because she was afraid of getting a Troll on her OWLs!” Ron blurted out between gasps of laughter. “Oh, I’m going to hold this against you forever, hag.”

“Oh my God. Fuck off. All of you. Shut up!” Hermione snarled. They continued to laugh. “For Merlin’s sake, this is a hospital, you *dunces*.”

“We’re the dunces? You didn’t take Care because you don’t want to touch *creatures*.”

“Shut the fuck *up,* Harry.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry was nose deep in reading as he walked towards the lift, reaching vaguely for the button as he looked over the curse. He was reading about a variant on a Mummification Curse. It wasn’t exactly what Katie Bella had—at least, he didn’t think so—, but there were similarities. It made Harry think that Tom’s theory about the curse being multi-layered and personally crafted make more sense.

They'd know more once they got the opal necklace that had started it all in their possession. Now, they just had to get the paperwork through in the Auror Office, and Harry still had a few more waivers and contracts to sign with the Department of Mysteries. Harry frowned when his hand collided with flesh.

“Can’t keep your hands off of me?”

Harry blinked, nearly dropping his book to the ground.

“Oh. It’s you. Hello,” Harry stammered like a fucking idiot. Tom smirked back at him, and suddenly, Harry felt like he had when he had first had to adjust to the fact that he had slept with his boss for the very first time.

He had thirty-seven more hours with the man. Merlin, kill him.

“It’s me. In all my glory,” Tom smirked as if he hadn’t said something terribly romantic and telling just last night.

There are so many ways to ruin a person, darling.

“I was just going to, uh, find you,” Harry blurted out.

“Don’t you have work-ups? My work-ups?” Tom asked with a raised eyebrow.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I did that this morning. Haven’t you been to your office today?”

“Not at all. I’ve been with Miss Bell today, checking over your work,” Tom returned and he raised an eyebrow, watching Harry. Harry winced, suddenly nervous and he rocked back and forth as they waited for the lift.

“And...how did I do?”

“It was...fine. Your spellwork was messy, but ultimately, you did ease her pain. We need to work on that. The messiness,” Tom said firmly. He didn’t sound too worried about it.

And Harry knew that he had a problem with that. It wasn't the first time that had been brought to his attention. He was a trainee, so it was to be expected that he wouldn't have an edge of perfection that was crafted through years of practice. But, he felt a flare of embarrassment, suddenly. He was supposed to be good. He was supposed to be the best, but here he was, making rookie mistakes.

“Sorry about that. I’ll do better,” Harry rasped.

Tom frowned at him. “I know. Don’t worry about it. I fixed it,” Tom said as the lift *finally* arrived. “What are you reading?”

“A case study about a variant on a Mummification Curse. A lot of the same symptoms as Katie Bell. It made me think that your idea about the curse being layered had merit,” Harry said.

Tom snorted. “Of course it does. I’m me.”

“Your arrogance isn’t very attractive, you know,” Harry teased with a tiny smile.

Tom looked at him from the corner of his eye. “I have it on good authority that my arrogance is quite charming.”

“Oh, yeah? On whose authority?”

“Yours.”

“Bugger off,” Harry snapped.

“I’d rather—no, you’ve made it too easy,” Tom sighed, shaking his head. Harry rolled his eyes, attempting to hide his smile because really, Tom *was* quite charming. “There’s some paperwork you need to sign. My last liaison with the Department of Mysteries just retired recently. We’re getting a new one. He’s in my office, apparently.”

The doors to the lift opened on the Spell Damage floor and Tom waved his hand as an overdramatic *after you*. Harry rolled his eyes to hide how charmed he was by that. He came

to a stop when he saw the tall, broad-shouldered young man that waited by the door.

“Theo?” Harry rasped.

Theodore Nott turned around and grinned. “Harry!” he cheered and he strode right up to Harry, grabbing him by his face and laying a smacking kiss on his lips, as they always playfully had whenever they saw one another after their amicable breakup.

“Uh…” Harry said as his brain short-wired.

“Who the *fuck* is this, Harry?” Tom asked, sounding unpleasantly amiable.

“Oh, right. I’m Unspeakable Theodore Nott, your new Department of Mysteries liaison,” Theodore said, walking forward, stretching out his hand. There was a long moment where Tom slowly looked down at Theodore’s hand and then looked back at him, his crazed smile twitching.

Theodore let his hand drop to his side, awkwardly.

“And how do you know Harry?” Tom repeated, still sounding so, *so* happy.

Harry bit his bottom lip. “Uh. This is Theo. My ex-boyfriend.”

“Ah. I see.” Tom didn’t sound like he saw anything at all. In fact, he sounded more irritated than Harry had ever heard him sound before. “Why don’t we go into my office?”

Tom opened the door with a twist of his wand and he waved Theodore and Harry through. Harry flushed when he felt the man’s broad hand against the small of his back. And then, that hand disappeared again and the door shut behind them.

“Harry, how’s the Healing life treating you?” Theodore asked as he went through his bag, pulling files out of his briefcase and laying them out on the desk in front of him, without even asking Tom. Harry winced at that.

“Um, well,” Harry said softly.

Theodore laughed. "I'm sure. You're only a trainee and already assisting on a project like this. Truly, Healer Riddle, this one was always the most talented at spellwork. He was my tutor for sixth year in Defense. It's how we got together," Theodore said with a laugh.

“He doesn’t want to hear about that,” Harry rushed.

Tom snorted. “Oh, I can assure you, I do.”

“No. You don’t,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

Theodore hadn't seemed to hear them. "Oh, Harry was a bit of a partier during our school days. He was always drinking or dancing or talking with boys. I'm surprised that I was able to keep him for so long. Before me, his longest relationship was what? Four days?"

"Wow, Theo, just make me sound like a whore," Harry said with a terribly false smile.

Theodore winced and took a step back as he took out an inkwell and a quill.

“Okay. This document is about secrecy until you’re able to accurately present your findings. This one is a permit for using Dark magic. And this one is a permit for coming and going to the Department of Mysteries, provided that you set up a bracket of time at least a week beforehand with an owl to me," Theodore said. Harry sighed, taking up the quill. "Just sign here. Initial there. Sign here. Two initials, there and there. Sign here."

Harry did as he was instructed and he froze when he felt Theodore’s hand on his back. Harry looked over his shoulder at Tom, but the older man’s gaze was zeroed in on Theodore’s hand.

“All done,” Harry said, voice high and squeaky as he stepped back, carefully pulling away from Theodore. “Say, *mate*, glad to see you’re doing well.”

Theodore frowned, mouthing the word, *mate*, because really, Harry had literally never referred to Theodore as that before.

“Of course. Say, Harry, are you seeing anyone?” Theodore asked.

Tom made a sharp noise in the back of his throat. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to punch someone in the face. Preferably Rodolphus. Pleasure meeting you, Unspeakable Nott.”

“Nice to meet you too!” Theodore called as Tom threw the door open with an unnecessary crash, and then, he turned back to Harry. “I’m not asking you because I want to date you.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Harry gasped out, and he saw Tom pause in the doorway, tension leaking out of his shoulders.

“It’s just, I’ve got a friend. Real fit. He’s got tons of money. His name is Bl—”

Tom stormed away, slamming the door shut behind him. Immediately, Harry punched Theodore in the shoulder.

“Merlin, you’re a fucking idiot! Are you trying to get killed?” Harry snarled.

“Ow! I forgot how hard you punched. What the bloody hell is wrong with you, you stupid bint?” Theodore snapped back, and, oh maybe that was why they broke up.

Maybe name-calling was foreplay for Ron and Hermione, but Harry certainly didn’t like being called ‘stupid’ and Theodore didn’t really appreciate it either.

"That's not just my boss, Theo. That's my fucking ex-boyfriend and neither of us is really *over* it yet!” Harry hissed.

“How was I supposed to know?” Theodore demanded. “And what are you doing dating your boss?”

"You could literally spot the tension from a million miles away, you dolt. You're bloody fucking oblivious. And for your information, I didn't know that he was my boss until after I slept with him for the first time, and then, when we started dating proper, all of a fucking sudden—look there—a wild fiance appears. And you've known me since we were eleven. If anyone of our year was going to date their boss, clearly, it would be *me*."

Theodore's eyes widened as he tried to process Harry's slurred explanation. "Okay...we really need to have lunch more often."

DIAGNOSIS

"He looks upset. He used to come to us when he was upset," Bellatrix sighed as she picked over her salad, staring at Tom. Rodolphus followed her gaze.

Tom did, in fact, look upset. His jaw was tight and his hands were clenched into tight fists as he stormed through the cafeteria, grabbing a sandwich and a bottle of water to go as his *very* light dinner. He didn't even stop to mock Snape, which meant he was *really* upset.

"Well, now the sight of us makes him upset," Rodolphus said calmly. "Because we were shitty friends."

Bellatrix glowered at him. "I hate you," she snarled, stabbing at her food.

"No, you don't," Rodolphus drawled. "I'm your only friend."

Bellatrix scoffed under her breath. She couldn't contest that. Rodolphus *was* her only friend. Suddenly, she longed for the days where it had been the three of them against the world. When she had first met Tom Riddle, she'd been taken with him, immediately and absolutely. He was a half-blood, but, he had, no doubt, proven himself to all of Slytherin house. He had been cute, and then, he'd grown into the handsome man he was.

It was Tom that had inspired Rodolphus and Bellatrix to follow after him into the Healing program—as if they had ever had any other choice. They would follow him anywhere.

He was like a flame, and they were two moths, gravitating towards his presence.

It was pathetic.

They were pathetic.

"I want it to be like when we were young," Bellatrix said.

Rodolphus looked up. "Elaborate."

"I miss when we would go to the Leaky Cauldron and drink Firewhiskey until three in the morning after a good procedure. I miss listening to the wireless and sharing our best cases. I

miss sitting on the floor and eating takeaway while we listened to Tom complain about how stupid everyone else in the world is," Bellatrix whispered.

Rodolphus watched her for a very long time and then, he went back to eating his sandwich. Normally, Bellatrix would be outraged, because it felt very much like he was ignoring her, but she knew Rodolphus well enough. He was thinking about how to respond. Suddenly, he put his sandwich back down and squinted at her.

"You don't miss just the two of you?" Rodolphus asked.

It would be a lie to say that she didn't. She missed being in the same bed as Tom. She missed seeing him first thing in the morning. She missed bonding over a quick breakfast of tea and a croissant from the bakery downstairs from the flat. She missed the intimacy that sex allowed, the way he wouldn't break eye contact with her when he was inside of her.

But, she would tell Rodolphus. Because, then, he'd know that, sometimes, in her weakest moments, Bellatrix thought about whether Tom was the same with Harry Potter.

Bellatrix wondered if Tom had ever had morning sex with Harry Potter. She wondered if Tom had ever taken Harry to the bakery because he couldn't stand eggs in the morning and that was Bellatrix's favorite thing in the morning—she made excellent eggs. Bellatrix wondered if he fucked Harry slow or fast; Tom liked to fuck her fast and from behind, but sometimes, he'd fuck her on her back and would watch her, drink her in, gorge on her.

So, Bellatrix couldn't say yes to Rodolphus' question, because then, he'd know.

Like he always did.

"I miss how we all used to be," Bellatrix said again. "I want him to forgive me. I miss him. I miss us."

Rodolphus snorted, shaking his head. "Tom Riddle, forgive us? He still holds a grudge against your sister for saying that he was less handsome than Lucius Malfoy when we were twelve."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Bellatrix snarled.

Rodolphus looked at her, grim, and suddenly, Bellatrix was reminded that Rodolphus had lost someone too.

"Bella, you overestimate his ability to forgive."

DIAGNOSIS

"Thank you, Lily, for taking some time out of your busy schedule for this meeting," Albus said.

"Really, Albus, it's no problem. Lavender is still in physical therapy," Lily said, her voice dry, and she turned to the two other occupants of the office, an unnervingly cool look on her face. "Truly, it's an honor to meet both of you. Your dedication to Healing will not go unnoticed here at St. Mungo's."

Amos Diggory's chest puffed up and Lily fought the urge to roll her eyes.

Albus said that people didn't appreciate condescension, even if they were pompous for no real reason other than possessing a large sum of money—*especially* if they possessed a large sum of money. James had been like that when they were kids. Lily had promptly disabused him of any notion that he was any better than her.

"Of course. Truly, the reputation of yourself and your colleagues far surpass any possible doubts that we may have about our contributions to this hospital."

Blaise Zabini was young for an investor—only a few years older than Lily's son. But, he was the son of the infamous 'Widow'. Twelve husbands had dropped dead in her wake before she herself had finally passed. It was still one of Sirius' greatest regrets that he hadn't busted her himself. Lily had no doubt that she had passed not only her charms to her son. He could probably brew a poison to rival any antidote that Severus or Lily could cook up themselves.

"Thank you. We greatly appreciate it," Lily said with a gentle smile, carefully crafted more moments like then. To make her more approachable.

Diggory cleared his throat, irritated that all of the attention had been moved to his more handsome, younger counterpart.

"We should all grab lunch sometime this week. My treat," Diggory declared.

Albus hummed. "I would love to take part, but alas, I must decline. I have a Mind Healing procedure to prepare for quite soon, and I'll need to train up my assistant somewhat."

"Come now, Albus. This would be a working lunch. After all, the charity gala is approaching," Diggory said pointedly. "And Blaise and I have quite a host of friends that have expressed interest."

Immediately, Lily's mind drifted. Those funds would revamp the hospital. Even the sizeable amount that had been gifted that day would contribute to an improved Emergency & Triage center and perhaps a greenhouse used only to host rare plants.

"—to enlist Lily to help plan the annual Charity Gala," Albus was saying.

Lily jerked, looking wide-eyed at Albus. "I'm sorry, Albus?"

Albus had that devilish spark in his lightning blue eyes.

"As you are currently on sabbatical, I thought, who better to assist the board and our new members than you? After all, I daresay you know this hospital better than nearly anyone," Albus said pointedly and Lily scoffed.

She knew what he was trying to do.

He was trying to get out of planning the gala, as he did every single fucking *year*.

“Wouldn’t Riddle or McGonagall or Severus be more appropriate?” Lily asked primly. “As you said, I *am* on sabbatical.”

“I would be honored to work with the esteemed Healer Evans,” Blaise said, smiling charmingly. Lily fought the urge to sneer. What a smarmy little ass. “I would love to pick your brain about antidotes, and the like.”

Oh, she was sure he would.

"As you know, Tom is very much preoccupied with his project," Albus said firmly. "And, I'm sure that Lavender will *adore* helping her mother. If I remember correctly, Lavender has always been a bit of a social butterfly.”

Well, there was no denying that.

“Oh, please, Healer Evans, we would be delighted. As I said, our friends would *adore* attending something with your name attached,” Diggory said firmly. “We insist.”

Lily huffed under her breath. “Well, if you *insist*," she said snippily. She looked up, blank-eyed again, and gave that empty smile. "How about I escort you, gentlemen, out? We can discuss logistics for lunch."

Zabini hummed as he stood, smoothing down his velvet cloak. “Of course. Typically, I would send an owl or perhaps my house elf to make my appointments—”

“As would I,” Diggory interjected.

“But, as we are here in person, this would be more appropriate,” Zabini hummed.

Lily stood and escorted the two men out, shooting one more sneering glare over her shoulder. Albus just smiled innocently, as if he hadn’t purposely orchestrated her meeting the two obnoxious men just so that he could keep her busy. He would probably frame it as some ridiculous therapy exercise—interacting with people that she didn’t instinctually like, or some rot, like that.

"I am generally free in the afternoons. I could, however, be free between the hours of eleven and three, but lunch *has* to be over fifteen to three. My daughter finishes physical therapy around that time,” Lily said firmly, her tone giving no room for argument.

Diggory swallowed. “I heard about that terrible business. I do hope she’s doing well.”

“She’s fine,” Lily said flatly.

Truly, Lavender was doing great. But, it wasn’t any of this man’s business.

"My boy is actually going to be in Tom Riddle's trial, you know. He's a bit ill, and I wanted the best, and look, the very best," Diggory said as if it were a brag. Lily didn't want to point out that if Tom Riddle wanted him, he wasn't just ill—he was dying. Riddle liked the impossible cases. "The things that Tom Riddle has accomplished with a wand and a bit of imagination is quite astounding. In truth, he's why I've decided to make the sizeable donation to St. Mungo's."

Lily resisted the urge to snort.

The things that Tom Riddle has accomplished with his cock.

“Yes, we’re all quite proud,” Lily said brusquely as they stepped into the lift. “Now, lunch?”

“I have meetings all this week. Next week Tuesday?” Zabini asked.

Diggory hummed. “That works for me! Now, do you think I could possibly meeting Healer Riddle today? I would love to ask about his progress with his trials.”

Lily’s urge to roll her eyes was strong, but she resisted.

She doubted Riddle would give the man the time of day. And she doubted it was even *legal* for him to tell the many anything, anyway.

"I can ask," she said snippily as they exited on the ground floor. She walked up to the directory desk and the matron that sat there jumped. It was the same one that she had terrified when she had returned from France, asking after her daughter. "Hello, matron. Can you tell me where Riddle is? I have a pair of gentlemen that would love to meet him."

“I-I have, ma’am—”

“Where is he, then?” Diggory practically barked.

Zabini finally looked vaguely interested.

“M-Ma’am, I just saw him running down the hall with your son,” the matron said, and Zabini was *definitely* interested now. Lily supposed that not many knew that she had a son. “Running towards the Spell Damage floor. Nearly knocked down a family of four visiting. They had so many red sparks between the two of them. They were Summoned.”

Lily pressed her lips in a grim line. She knew what that meant.

“What does that mean?” Zabini asked curiously.

Their patient was dying.

Of course, Diggory didn’t need to know that.

“A patient was in need. I’m afraid you won’t be able to meet them today. Have a good day, gentlemen,” Lily said as sweetly as possible. It wasn’t very sweet at all. “My daughter is alone at home, and I’d like to start her dinner, and she’s an assignment to finish up.”

She didn’t wait for their goodbyes.

DIAGNOSIS

"Present the case, Granger," Emmeline said as she pulled her black dragonhide gloves up over her arms, her lips pressed into a thin line. Her lips were a bold slash of red. Not a single ringlet was out of place.

She didn’t look like she was going to exorcise venom from a man’s veins.

“Rolf Scamander, 30 years old, admitted for three rather vicious bites from an Akelarre snake in rural Spain after a magizoological expedition,” Hermione said primly.

She knew that Rolf had at first been admitted to the hospital in Paris—the one Lily had been teaching at—, but Emmeline’s expertise had made it clear that only she could treat him. After all, she specialized in all kinds of creature venoms—werewolf, vampire, and, apparently, snakes.

“And what are the symptoms of Akelarre venom?” Vance asked coolly.

"The venom could be considered Dark magic, with Akelarre's being specifically bred to kill. First, it drives the victim hysterical, gradually poisoning the blood. It overworks the liver and kidneys until there is multisystem organ failure. At the point of death, the organs will liquify and excrete from the corpse. This is what the Akelarre consumes," Hermione said.

She had drilled *that* into her brain all day.

Vance didn’t look particularly impressed. Hermione supposed that she should’ve taken her Care OWLs and NEWTs. She’d make sure to owl Lavender for more notes and perhaps, Madame Pince for book recommendations. The old librarian had always been quite helpful to Hermione in her pursuit of knowledge.

“And the treatment process today?” Vance asked.

Hermione cleared her throat. “We’ll be cutting open his wounds, bleeding him out while steadily pumping him with Blood Replenishing potions and the antidote. Any of the bowels that are compromised will be cut out. We already know that one of his kidneys has failed. We’ll remove it.”

“Good. I know this has been an ill-adjustment period for the both of us,” Vance began, looking over at Hermione, and it struck Hermione that this was the first time that they had made eye contact since Ron had run away from Vance.

“I don’t hold it against you. You telling Ron,” Hermione said firmly.

Vance's lip curled but she didn't say anything. "We're going to find our rhythm. I'll teach you who you need to be. I want you to be a good Healer. The best Healer. You're going to go into a theatre and know exactly what to do and when to do it. That's the kind of Healer I want you to be."

She said nothing about compassion or kindness or an unrelenting passion.

As if she didn't think Hermione capable of such things.

Sometimes, Hermione didn't think she was capable of them either.

And then, she stepped into the theatre and saw him. She felt all of those things and one thing more—a terrible, terrible fear.

Vance moved past her, nodding at the matrons in greeting.

"Let's change the fucking world, eh?" Vance asked she walked in.

The matrons grinned in agreement, nodding.

Hermione was frozen in the doorway.

Vance glanced over her shoulder, frowning. "Granger, come here. You can make the first cut."

"I-I...I...what?" Hermione stammered, looking up.

She knew what she had to do. She had to lift her wand and think *Diffindo*, and yet, the thought of lifting her wand made her want to spew bile. Hermione took a step back.

Vance's eyes narrowed. "Step out of my theatre until you can stop shaking."

She wasn't exactly unkind, but she was firm. Hermione stumbled out, backward, nearly paralyzed by fear as she walked into the hallway and collapsed against the near wall. Her hands were shaking. She slid down against the wall.

Her hands were shaking.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she was sitting there until she heard footsteps. She looked up, expecting an irritated Vance.

Minerva McGonagall stared back. "Are you crying, Granger? Healers don't get to cry," McGonagall said coolly. "Not even when a patient dies."

She said it so calmly, as if it had happened a thousand times.

Hermione thought about it all the time. She hadn't had a patient die yet. It had been close, but they hadn't done it yet, and every time she stepped into a theatre, she was terrified it would be that one. That one would die under her watch, in her care.

“How do you keep your edge, Healer? Because I’ve watched you and you’ve been doing this a long time and you’re clean, you’re focused, you are the job. Nothing gets to you. And the thing is, ma’am, I was like that. Until I got here. Until I actually started doing this job and now everything is, is fuzzy…” Hermione stammered, shaking her head. Her hands were shaking.

Her hands had never shaken before.

The only other time was the first time that she had found herself in the theatre at Emmeline Vance’s side. Then, Emmeline had calmed her with words promising glory. But, there was no glory now. That wasn’t Harry’s sister—a girl that Hermione had never met, but for all intents and purposes, was *her* sister, too. There were no stakes now.

Except, there were *always* stakes.

“That’s beside the point,” McGonagall said sharply.

“No, that *is* the point, Healer. I was the *best*. Top of my year. I made sure that I was *twice* as good...to get half as much as they have—" Hermione didn't know who 'they' were. Was it the purebloods? The half-bloods? The white people in her school? She didn't know, but she did know that her parents had to be twice as good and so did she. “And I had an edge. And I’ve lost it and I need it. I need it back. So, if you could just tell me, how you keep yours and how not to be affected, I know I could be a great Healer. So, if you could just give me the answers. I would really appreciate it.”

And she was tearing up, but she didn’t know why.

All she knew was that she needed a cigarette.

“Get up, Healer Granger, and breathe,” McGonagall barked.

“But…” Hermione started.

“No. That edge…” McGonagall said, trailing off. “I have the answers. But, I’m not going to tell you. I’m not going to be responsible for you becoming less human.”

Hermione was silent. She didn’t know what to think of that.

“Healer—”

“But, I will give you a word of advice,” Minerva McGonagall declared. “Breathe, Healer Granger. Don’t be crass. You’re sulking.”

Hermione’s eyes widened and she looked at the woman standing by the door. Minerva McGonagall looked older and younger than her years, wisdom lining her face. She was staring at Hermione as if she were looking at a memory in a Pensieve. Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but McGonagall shook her head.

“Women of your generation are graceless. It’s an affront to nature,” McGonagall chastised, tilting her head as she looked at Hermione. “Mediocre Healers will see you and feel

themselves wilting in your shadow. Do not shrink to console them."

"I—" Hermione began. McGonagall lifted her hand.

"Do not look for friends here. Few of these people have the capacity to understand you. The ones that do will find you. The others never will. If you're lucky, one day when you're old and shriveled like me, you'll find a young Healer with little regard for anything but their craft, and you'll train them like I will train you. Until then, read a good book," McGonagall said and she sounded so serious that Hermione felt as if her chest had been cracked open and McGonagall had reached inside of her to grab a stranglehold of her doubts.

"You're going to train me? I have a teacher," Hermione said quietly.

McGonagall pursed her lips. "Perhaps. I'm going to make sure you understand...understand *why* we do what we do. Now, get up. You have a procedure to continue. Your other teacher won't wait for you much longer."

Hermione scoffed. "Why would she wait for me at all? She doesn't need me."

"No. She doesn't," McGonagall declared. "But, I remember an Emmeline Vance about your age who nearly broke down the first time she was in theatre too. Nearly everyone does."

"Harry didn't. Did Lily Evans?" Hermione asked softly.

McGonagall hummed. "I think that they...are a breed made of ice and fury. I don't place much hope in Divination or the art of inexact sciences, but...I do believe that there are some of us destined for such paths. They are of that breed."

Hermione looked away, narrow-eyed. "I...see."

"You have greatness in you, Granger. Don't disappoint."

Hermione looked up, wide-eyed, and she stared at the strong, wizened hand offered to her. She slowly reached up to grab McGonagall's hand and the woman pulled her to her feet. McGonagall watched for a long moment before she turned her by her shoulders and pushed.

Hermione stumbled forward and then straightened, smoothing down her robes. She cleared her throat as she strode back to the double doors and threw them open. Vance was waiting, staring at her with a look of irritation and understanding.

"Granger. Are you ready?" Vance barked. "Or are you going to have another breakdown?"

"I apologize for my behavior, Healer Vance," Hermione said, raw honesty in her voice. Vance looked surprised. "If you'd permit it, I'd like to stay in your theatre."

"I'm not going to baby you after this. This is the job. Any amount of talent that you have means nothing if you can't keep your head in this theatre. You understand me?" Vance barked, and her voice was harsh, but Hermione knew what she was trying to say.

"I understand. I am sorry. I'm ready," Hermione insisted.

“Good. Come here. Make the first cut.”

Chapter End Notes

Not a lie, I imagine that they’re dancing to ‘Redbone’ by Childish Gambino.

Also, someone raised the idea of Harry struggling with Healing. After all, he’s only a trainee—an exceptional one, but still a trainee. Anyway, it’s my thought that mucking up Healing would be a lot harder than it is in medicine. After all, they have fixes for really simple things. Not setting a broken arm can lead to infection and the like in the Muggle world. It’s easy as casting a diagnostics spell and giving someone a bit of Skele-Gro in the magical world. But, I also want to see Harry struggle.

In short: It’s coming. Promise.

Also, just a note: next chapter takes place in the same shift. If I’m doing the math correctly, which I think I am, then, it’s been about 15 hours into their 48-hour shift, when Hermione gets ready to do the procedure with Vance. So, that means that there are 33 hours left.

A lot of shit can happen in 33 hours.

EDIT:

Akelarre Snake - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/162878934942/akelarre-a-clearly-marked-snake-found-in-spain

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What have we got?" Tom barked as the matrons bustled around Katie's room. Unlike the family of visitors from before, the matrons moved out of his way as he cut through the room, wand held aloft. He didn't wait for the matrons to speak, already waving his wand and casting the diagnostics charm.

"Tom?" Harry asked, nervously.

"She's deteriorating. The curse is more malignant than we thought, *dammit*," Tom hissed under his breath. Harry's nostrils flared.

"We don't have the necklace. We can't ascertain what curse it is, what kind of curse, how *many* curses—"

"I'm well aware, thank you," Tom said shortly. Harry's lips curled at the dismissal. Tom looked at him, but didn't apologize. Harry didn't think he would. "You gathered the curse in the base of her spine. I went in and picked any of the raw strings that were left, gathered. But, it only settled there. The entire body is hospitable to the curse. It attached itself to her spinal cord. It's her fucking nerves."

Harry winced. It was exactly where they *didn't* want it to be.

"And her muscles?" Harry asked.

"Atrophied, of course. It's going to destroy her nervous system, and if she doesn't die from *that*, she'll die from the multisystem organ failure. Lose-lose situation," Tom muttered under his breath. He was mumbling, probably working through everything.

"How do you know that?" Harry demanded.

Tom looked up at him. "It's what I would do. If I had designed this curse."

Harry flinched.

"What do we do, then? We can't just let her...die," he said, his voice breaking off.

Tom acted as if he didn't seem to hear her. "All non-essential personnel that hasn't signed multiple NDAs and permit licenses, step out of the room. Thank you," Tom said without waiting for anyone to follow his orders. Of course, they did, scurrying from the room as if their lives depending on it. Tom bent over Katie, until their faces were inches apart, his eyes narrowed. He went to pull her eyelids open, looking into glossy non-seeing eyes.

"Tom...what are we—"

“Shh, Harry. She’s going to seize any moment. I need to see her eyes when she does. Now, be the lovely assistant you are, and get a bit so she doesn’t bite her tongue off,” Tom said without even looking at him.

Harry rolled his eyes but did as he was told. He waved his wand, Summoning the bit to his hand he gracelessly slid it between Katie’s teeth. As if on a timer, she began to seize, her pupils growing and retracting as her muscles strained against the restraints that she was kept in. Tom didn’t move away from her, only staring into Katie’s eyes. Her entire body was fighting against the restraints, her hair whipping around her head by an imaginary wind.

“Tom?” Harry whispered.

It was as if a spell was broken, and suddenly, Katie stopped seizing, collapsing back into the bed, her body exhausted.

“Ah. I see,” Tom murmured to himself. He straightened, looking over at Harry. “Her seizures aren’t just seizures.”

“You think?” Harry snapped, irritated.

Tom looked unamused. “It’s not caused by the curse either.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“It’s not caused by the curse. It’s being caused by her magic,” Tom explained. “Magic is meant to protect its host. It’s like an immune system. Her eyes would have reacted if was abnormal nerve activity. But, she was *watching* me. She’s lucid. Which means that her seizures are her body attempting to protect itself. But, the seizures aren’t helping her. They’re making her weaker.”

Harry’s eyes widened when he realized what Tom was getting at. “The curse is turning her magic against her. It’s making her magic attack her body. That’s what’s causing the damage.”

“Exactly,” Tom muttered. “It’s my hypothesis that her magic is feeding the curse and destroying it all at once. Except, her magic is *becoming* the curse. It’s a terrible vicious cycle. I suppose, in Muggles, it would do the same with their immune system. It would attack the host.”

“We can’t *do* anything. We could render her a Squib, but how does one even go about that?” Harry demanded. Tom didn’t say anything for a long time. Instead, he watched Katie Bell, curiously. Harry’s patience frayed farther. “Tom! We can’t just let her *die.*”

Tom looked up at him but didn't say anything for a long time. There was something like pity in his eyes and it only sparked a spore of resentment in Harry. He sneered at the older man, and still, Tom didn't react, only watching him.

“No. We can’t,” Tom finally said.

“Then, what *do* we do?” Harry demanded.

“We start her on an actual treatment plan,” Tom declared. “Not just pain management. We’re going to administer antiviral potions. It’s acting like a disease. We’ll treat it like a disease.”

Harry swallowed.

Antiviral potions worked within the first twenty-four hours or not at all.

“Okay,” Harry whispered.

Tom nodded, reaching out and grabbing Harry’s shoulder. He squeezed once. “Come. We’ll consult Lovegood before she goes home so we can start her on something. Then, we’ll get a Potions & Plant Poisonings consult in the morning. There are a few Dark venoms that I think might target the curse and overwhelm it. Like parasites battling for dominance in a host. If we can find a venom that will properly consume the curse, maybe the venom can be treated.”

It sounded like a plan. A good plan. A Tom plan.

“Sounds like a good plan,” Harry muttered.

Tom preened. “It is. Now, come. Lovegood, and then, sleep. We’ll need it.”

It was a good plan. A great plan.

A plan that Harry was terrified wouldn’t work.

DIAGNOSIS

“Good morning, Minerva. Severus. Thank you for joining me so early.”

Minerva looked at him, her expression grim, as she took a long sip of her black sugarless tea. She swept into the Head Healer's office, stepping past him, Severus storming in on her heels. They both sat in front of the man's desk. Albus was shockingly cheerful as he went around his office, fixing this and that, twisting and rearranging his varying knick-knacks.

“Albus. It’s seven in the morning. We’re here at dawn as if we were a pair of trainees. What *is it* that you Summoned us for?” Severus hissed, irritated.

Albus beamed. “I have it on good authority that you have a consult in about an hour,” Albus said pointedly. “Tom requested you.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “He must truly need assistance if he’s asked *you* for a consult,” Minerva muttered under her breath.

“Why wouldn’t he? I’m the best Potions Master in this hospital,” Severus sneered.

Minerva snorted, looking away, immune to Severus' poisonous glare. "Really, Albus. My shift didn't start until noon prior to you calling this meeting. I'd like to get a few more hours of sleep before my scheduled procedures."

"Of course," Albus allowed with a genial smile. "I summoned both of you this morning to discuss one of our young trainees."

"Is this about Potter?" Severus snarled, his lips twisting into that ugly little smile of his. "Is he in—"

"What *is* your problem with Potter, Severus?" Minerva snapped.

No one said anything for a long moment. They all knew what his problem was.

Harry was a very visceral reminder of the what—or rather who—Severus didn't have.

"It's about your Mr. Malfoy, actually," Albus said, his voice nearly cutting. Both Healers looked to him, sharply, and they saw that the amusement from before was gone. He would have no tolerance for pettiness. It was too early for such things.

"What about Malfoy?" Severus asked roughly.

"How is he performing? He and Miss Greengrass are the only two trainees that haven't declared a specialty as of yet," Albus prompted.

Minerva's brow furrowed. "Albus, why am *I* here? I don't teach—"

"Patience, please," Albus said, giving her an apologetic look.

Minerva pursed her lips and nodded.

"Malfoy and Greengrass are both performing well. I had no doubt that they would. They were trained by Lily, of course," Severus said. Minerva hid her irritation well. She had no idea how the man could take such pride in something that wasn't his own accomplishment. "Greengrass has been gravitating towards Magical Diseases, lately. Malfoy has, of course, continued studying Spell Damage. I believe that he would do well."

Albus looked oddly disappointed with Severus' report.

"Their performance—Healing-wise—has been good, then," Albus murmured, almost to himself. "Would you say they've been integrating socially?"

Severus blinked. "I don't understand the question. What does that have to do with their abilities as Healers?"

And then, Albus looked to Minerva, a sparkle in his eyes once more.

"Minerva, have you noticed anything?" Albus asked.

"They've no friends besides one another," Minerva said bluntly.

Severus scoffed. “They’re Healers. Healers don’t need friends.”

“And yet, you cling to Lily’s arse like a particularly stubborn hemorrhoid,” Minerva said nastily. There was a long moment of shock from both of the men. Minerva cleared her throat, regarding both of them with a look of disdain, after a long sip of tea. “I do apologize. I am operating on less than six hours of sleep. I watched Vance and Granger’s procedure last night. It lasted for quite some time.”

Severus turned an unfortunate motley of red and white, but he held his tongue.

“They’ve no friends, Severus,” Albus said gravely. “If they have no friends, they have no one to rely on or to trust in a situation that they cannot handle. There’s no basis for teamwork. If they can’t effectively work with others, they serve no purpose here. And so, I’ve decided on a change.”

“A change?” Severus asked.

“Yes. Draco Malfoy and Astoria Greengrass need a new teacher.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Morning, how’d you sleep?” Ron asked as he walked alongside Harry into the cafeteria. Harry mumbled something under his breath. Ron yawned and looked down at him, frowning. “What was that?”

"I didn't really get any sleep. Katie Bell's condition is deteriorating," Harry said softly. Ron's eyes widened at him. Harry looked up at him with a terribly sad smile. "I think she's going to die."

“I’m sorry about that, mate. Really, I am,” Ron said as earnest as possible.

It made Harry’s smile a little lighter, knowing that he had a friend like Ron. “Thanks. I can’t tell you about our treatment plan, but we’ll see how it turns out. I have a consult with Snape this morning. I hope he’s not a *total* jackass.”

“Oh, he might be. He’s brewing with me today.”

Ron and Harry turned as Neville approached, his arm carelessly thrown over Hannah’s shoulder, looking down at her with bright eyes. Hannah’s cheeks were bright pink and she shyly tucked a strand of wheat-colored hair behind her cheek. She looked far too happy in her hunter green robes at seven in the morning. Far, *far* too happy.

Ron and Harry exchanged looks.

“Where did you sleep last night?” Ron teased.

“With me,” Hannah declared. Ron gaped at her, shocked by her openness. Hannah only winked, looking far too proud of herself for her own good.

Harry grinned. “Nice, Neville. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“I *think* he had it in *her*,” Ron said, with a big bawdy wink that made Hannah break out into loud, obnoxious laughter. Harry winced.

“Oh, shut up! You two are disgusting,” Hermione declared as she strode through the cafeteria doors, pushing past them. She looked immaculate, not a stray curl out of place.

“You look chipper,” Harry observed as he grabbed his tray after her and followed her to the breakfast station. “Eggs, bacon, and toast, please!”

“You just skipped me,” Hermione observed plainly.

“I already know you’re just going to get fruit and a croissant. Let’s not pretend we don’t know one another,” Harry said, his voice flat. Hermione grinned at him, reaching forward to tug one long messy black lock. Harry winced, swatting her hand away with more force than necessary. “How did your procedure go?”

“Rough, at first. Smooth sailing at the end,” Hermione said.

She waited patiently for Harry’s food to be served before they moved to the self-serve section. She carelessly ladled an assortment of fruit on her plate, a small hill high. Harry stole a grape with zero shame and grinned at her as she stared at him, forever impatience in the corner of her eyes. She huffed but shook her head, deciding not to put up a fuss.

Good choice.

“Good for you,” Harry said. “Come on. I have to eat fast. I have a consult with Snape this morning and I’ll have to mediate a conversation between him and Tom.”

Hermione grimaced. “I don’t envy you.”

“I don’t envy me either,” Harry muttered under his breath as he finally joined his friends at their usual table. He looked over at Neville’s plate—a respectable breakfast roll and a banana. Then, he glanced at Ron’s plate and grimaced.

“A full fry-up? You’re going to clog your arteries,” Hermione admonished.

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve been tortured by Bellatrix Black and Rodolphus Lestrange for over twenty-four hours at this point. If I want a full English breakfast, I’ll have a full English breakfast.”

Hermione let out a haughty sound and looked down at her own meal, eating it primly.

“How was your day yesterday?” she asked, turning to Neville.

“I was working with Mandrakes all day, so my ears are ringing. But, now, today, I’ll be working with Snape. Unfortunately,” Neville tacked on for their benefit. Hannah simpered over his shoulder, sympathetic. The others nodded at him, feeling his pain. Snape was an arse on a good day and a piece of shit on his worst. “I suppose I’ll see you down there. Can I ask what you’ll need?”

“No, you cannot, but I appreciate you trying to assist,” Harry said with a grin. “How *is* it, having Snape and Sprout as your teachers now?”

“Snape is still my teacher in an informal capacity, especially now that he’s taken on Malfoy and Greengrass, but he’s still a right arse. At least he doesn’t banish me from his labs, screaming like a banshee,” Neville muttered. He looked around at the table and sighed. “You know, if I were still a kid, he’d be my Boggart.”

“What do you think your Boggart would be now?” Hannah asked.

Neville snorted. “Oh, I’m not telling. Not in front of this lot. They’ll mock me.”

“Oh, we all know Hermione and Harry’s. Failure,” Ron said with a barking laugh.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’ll have you know that I know my Boggart and it’s not ‘failure’.”

“Really? What is it?” Hannah asked curiously.

“A dementor. Had a run-in as a kid. Never got over it,” Harry said, openly volunteering the information.

“You’re afraid of fear itself,” Hermione said, sounding almost awed. “You’re a deep well, Harry Potter.”

“I try.”

“Good morning!”

The group of trainees looked up as Luna Lovegood bounced over. Harry blinked, suddenly seeing spots when he saw how violently bright her yellow and lime green robes were. Her blonde hair was piled high atop her head, showing off two false Galleons that weighed down her earlobes, nearly brushing against her shoulders. In her hands, she cradled a plate piled high of sugary powder white donuts.

“Uh. Good morning, Luna,” Neville said.

Luna smiled as she tilted her head, looking at them all with her all-seeing grey eyes.

“How is your patient doing, Harry?” Luna asked.

“Really good. Thanks for asking, Healer Lovegood—” Harry began.

Luna interrupted with, “Luna. Everyone calls me Luna.”

“She insists,” Hermione volunteered.

Luna looked around the table and then blinked as she looked at Ron. Slowly, she took a bite from a powder white donut, crusting her lips in sugar. “I know everyone at this table. I think I know you.”

“We’ve met, I think. At my house party? Well, Harry’s house. My party,” Ron said.

Luna blinked again. “Oh, yes. I was quite drunk. Harry’s house is very dark and frightening. It was lovely.”

Harry smothered his laugh against his palm. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Luna said giggling. “Hannah, are you nearly done? A dragon pox outbreak hit a magical early childcare center. We’ve three six-year-olds covered in pox.”

“I’ll be done soon. Just having a quick breakfast with my *boyfriend*,” Hannah giggled, punctuating her words with a kiss to Neville’s pink cheek.

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks, rolling their eyes. So, that was *definitely* their first time fucking, then. Good to know. Harry supposed.

"Oh, well, it seems that your crush on Harry is no longer hindering you. That's good for you, Neville. You should be happy. Have a good day everyone," Luna said cheerfully.

There was a beat of silence where everyone turned to look at Neville—who was still turning bright red—and then, to Harry. Finally, they all looked at Hannah who looked down at her breakfast, stunned by the sudden turn of events.

“Wait. What?” Hannah asked, looking up, still incredulous. “You...you fancy *him*?”

“No!” Neville squawked. Hannah scoffed, disbelieving. “Wait. Well, I did. And then, I didn’t. So, I don’t. Hannah, no. I’ve got you. You’re all I need—”

Hannah clenched her jaw. “Are you sure?” she asked, her voice more shrill than normal. “He’s got a history of sleeping with taken men.”

“Wow. Thank you *so* much,” Harry said in disbelief. He turned to look at Ron, waiting to see if he would share in his irritation, but Ron was watching it, gleeful. Harry would get no sympathy from him. He turned to look at Hermione, but she seemed just as intrigued.

“Hannah, love, I swear—”

“You share a house with him, Neville!”

“But, I’m not shagging him!”

“But, you want to!”

Luna blinked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Look, Hannah, he’s not even my type. You’ve *seen* my type. I like ‘em tall, arrogant, dark, and handsome. Neville isn’t it. Not that you aren’t cute and all, mate,” Harry added with a wink. He grinned at Hannah’s sound of outrage, and she jumped up, nearly knocking her tray to the ground as she stormed away.

“Not. Helping,” Neville said through clenched teeth. He scurried after his girlfriend.

“Wasn’t trying to! She called me a whore!” Harry called after him.

“For all intents and purposes, you’ve only shown that you’re a whore,” Ron pointed out.

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “Wow. Fuck you too, then.”

"Don't call him a whore. He's sexually explorative. And we don't slut-shame in this family," Hermione hissed.

“What the bloody hell is ‘slut-shaming’?” Ron demanded.

Harry’s attention had already faded as Hermione launched into a tirade about women and gender studies, and slut-shaming, and intersectionality, and a whole host of things that Harry thought might interest his mother, but didn’t *really* interest him at all. Instead, he looked down at his plate—did his friends really think he was a whore? Did they think everything with Tom was actually his fault? Was that everyone thought?

“Do you really still think that?” Harry asked, looking up sharply.

Hermione’s rant was cut short. She frowned.

“What?” Hermione asked quietly.

“Do you really think I’m a whore? Because I...I’ve done things that might make you think that,” Harry muttered.

Ron blinked. "Wait. Mate, no. I was joking. I don't give a fuck who you sleep with," Ron said firmly. "And you shouldn't either. I would never slut-shame you."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Wait, you know what slut-shaming is?"

“I’m not an idiot, Hermione. I can read context clues,” Ron muttered.

Hermione looked besotted. Harry was revolted.

If they weren’t going to get together, they had no right to look at one another like that—like they wanted to mash their bits together and make passionate love while calling each other terrible names.

“Suddenly, my appetite is gone. I’m going to try and gather my wits before I have to meet with *Snape.*”

“Right. Lunch?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “Might be sleeping. Definitely dinner though. I’ll find you.”

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione walked with purpose.

She *always* moved with purpose.

Currently, her purpose was to finish processing Rolf Scamander's prescription so that she could discharge him tomorrow. She looked at his charts again—he was doing well. Far better than Hermione had expected, in truth. It hadn't been what anyone would call a ‘textbook procedure'. She had only found a few cases about Akelarre venom, and really, just enough information to prove that they could remove the venom as one would do with other aggressive venoms.

If he had been found any later, he would’ve died.

Not that one would be able to tell with how cheerful Rolf Scamander *was* about the whole thing since he'd gotten a photograph of the rare snake. Really, priorities.

“Where are you stomping off to on this fine morning?”

Ron sidled up to her side, falling in step with her, a stack of files in his arms.

"It's nearly noon. And the pharmacy. I have a patient who needs his prescription processed so we can discharge him," Hermione said, without looking up from Scamander's papers. He was doing well. His heart rate was strong, his blood pressure was regular. The scarring was an unfortunate side effect, but not everyone warranted or could afford *very* expensive unicorn hair stitches.

"Look, I'm on my way there, too," Ron said with a grin. "I've got a patient, 53, and we thought he was addicted to deadly nightshade, but get this—he's addicted to Felix Felicis *too*. We found out this morning when he started having another cardiac event, and we made him tell us what else he was hooked on."

“Merlin, that’s a painful addiction,” Hermione said with a grimace. “But, really, if he was taking it, he should’ve known better. His provider should have known better too.”

Ron shrugged.

"They probably did, didn't care. We're thinking of getting a Mind Healing consult. Addiction is a disease after all. We think they'll be able to help. Therapy and all. Maybe provide him with the names of rehabs. But, for now, we're trying to wean him off," Ron said with a shrug. They turned the corner down the next corridor and went into the stairwell, bypassing the enormous crowd waiting by the lift.

“Do you know if anyone else is involved?” Hermione asked. “Felix Felicis is a controlled substance.”

“We’ve already Summoned the Aurors. Black isn’t pleased. She hates dealing with the Aurors on a good day,” Ron said. He grinned at her as he began to walk down two steps at a time, basking in Hermione’s pursed lips of disapproval. “It’s not *my* fault that your legs are so much shorter than mine.”

“Oh, shut up,” Hermione muttered. She scoffed, shaking her head. Aurors were in the building. She hadn't thought about McLaggen in months—not since the abortion—but she couldn’t help but think about him now. The sex had been mediocre at best. If she ever had kids, they would be conceived through mind-boggling sex. She’d make sure of it. “I hope they don’t see Harry. He’ll be in a right foul mood if he sees any Aurors he knows around.”

“Speaking of Harry...I wanted to talk to you about him,” Ron began.

He sounded almost nervous.

“Oh, Merlin. What about Harry?” Hermione sighed, shaking her head.

“You’re not ashamed of me, are you?” Ron asked, stopping on the landing.

Hermione nearly stumbled down the stairs. She took a deep breath and slowly descended the steps, stopping on the same landing as Ron. She reached for his hand, lacing their fingers together, and she smiled up at him.

“No. I could never be ashamed of you,” Hermione said, her voice soft. “Even if you’re a pig.”

“Right back at you. Even if you’re psychotic. Which you are.”

“Get to the point,” Hermione said, her voice hard again.

She still hadn’t let go of his hand as they began to walk again.

“Then, we need to tell Harry,” Ron said. Hermione looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Neville knows. Not that I’ve talked to him about it. I’ve tried, you know. But, he keeps saying that he’s traumatized, and I think, right now, he’s trying to salvage his relationship with his girlfriend.”

Hermione snorted. “Ugh, Hannah completely overreacted. He doesn’t fancy Harry anymore.”

“But, he did. And was dating Hannah while living with the guy he fancied. It’s fine to fancy two people at once, but it gets more complicated when you *live* with the one you’re not with,” Ron pointed out. “But, that’s not the point. I’m saying, we need to tell Harry. And by we, you.”

“Me? Why me?” Hermione demanded.

“Because. You understand one another. You’re the twisted twins,” Ron declared.

Hermione tried to fight the smile that was spreading across her face. “Is that what you and Neville call us?”

“It’s what *everyone* calls you two,” Ron said as he reached forward to pull the door open for them. Hermione led him through, tugging him along. “But, seriously. You have to tell him.”

Hermione sighed.

“Sure. He’s going to be so angry. I already told him I wasn’t seeing you. *We* told him that,” Hermione said to herself.

Ron hummed. “Yeah...well, you’ve still got to tell him.”

“Do I have a time limit?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah. How long do you think we can keep it from him without him being mad once we tell him? Well, however long you think that is...right before. I don’t want to hear him crowing about how ‘right’ he was.”

DIAGNOSIS

Draco paced when he was nervous. He paced up and down the office corridor on the Mind Healing floor, his thoughts rushing through his head. Dumbledore had asked to meet them at 2:30. It was already 2:34. It was late. The Head Healer was late.

“*What if we get dismissed from the program?*” Draco asked, his anxiety spilling from his mouth in a rush of French.

Astoria was frozen by the wall, staring at something far away. Slowly, she looked at him, blinking once, then twice. She shook her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her shoulder.

“*We won’t be. We were trained by Lily Evans herself. We have talent.*”

“*But, what if—*”

Astoria shook her head, reaching out to grab Draco’s hand in hers. She squeezed it tight, pulling him closer until she could press her forehead against his. Draco still underneath her touch, as he always did. They were the complete opposite of each other. If he was the hurricane, she was the eye of the storm, perfectly tranquil in his chaos.

“*No ‘what ifs’, Draco. It does you no good to work yourself up like this*,” Astoria insisted. “*What happens will happen. It will come to pass no matter how anxious you are.*”

Draco knew there was truth to her words, but they didn't help. It wouldn't help until he knew exactly what he was walking into it. Just as he made to knock on Dumbledore's door *again*,

the door swung open, revealing the man in his sunny yellow and lime green robes—terribly bright and shocking and *ugly*, if Draco was being quite honest.

“I do apologize for keeping you waiting. Come in, please,” Dumbledore said, ushering them forward. Draco was frozen in his spot until Astoria swept past him, tugging him in after her. She guided him into his seat and sat next to him, her ankles crossed, hands folded in her lap. “Lemon drop?”

“No. Thank you,” Astoria said, her tone stilted.

So, she was just as put off as Draco was. She was just better at hiding her nerves.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk, popping a lemon drop into his own mouth. He hummed with satisfaction, his eyes crinkling with pleasure. Shuffling parchment on his desk, he didn’t seem to notice the anxiety of the two trainees sitting before him. Either he didn’t notice or he didn’t care. Suddenly, he looked up, as if he had just remembered what he was meant to be doing.

“How are you both adjusting to life at St. Mungo’s? I do hope you’re both happy,” Dumbledore said earnestly.

Draco and Astoria exchanged looks of bewilderment.

“We are adjusting well, Head Healer. How can we help you?” Astoria asked, voice clear and brisk and pointed. Dumbledore blinked, wide-eyed.

“Do you think that you have been benefiting from Severus’ teaching?” Dumbledore asked instead of answering Astoria’s question. Astoria looked thrown.

Draco grimaced.

They both knew the answer to that one. Severus Snape was a fine teacher and all. He was a good Healer. He knew what he was talking about. But, also, he asked *far* too many questions about Lily’s comings and goings while she was in France. He constantly wanted to know if she responded to their letters—which she always did as punctually as she could—and then, was quite angry when he saw that she had. All in all, it would’ve been worth it if I either of them wanted to go into Potions & Plants Poisonings.

Unfortunately, neither of them did.

“We have outgrown his particular skill set,” Draco said bluntly.

Astoria elbowed him in the side.

Dumbledore looked more amused than anything else.

“I thought so,” he said to himself. He brightened again. “Then, I believe it is time you both made a choice. What are your specialties?”

Astoria straightened. “Magical Bugs & Diseases,” she blurted out. “In the Children’s Ward.”

Draco blanched, looking over at her. “Children? You want to be around *children*?”

"They are interesting. Little incubators for evolving diseases. Resilient. Like soldiers. I like them," Astoria said, her voice stilted. She ignored Draco, then, leaning forward. Her hauntingly serious eyes stilled on Dumbledore's face. "I know that I may come off as cold. But, Luna Lovegood is the best. I want her as my teacher. I will work with Hannah Abbott, well. I can—”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Dumbledore said gently.

Astoria reared back like she'd been slapped. She faltered.

“I...I have been called cold. Some will not believe I can work with children. But, they are...the future. They are important,” Astoria implored. “They give hope.”

“And that’s why I will allow it,” Dumbledore said gently. “Your passion speaks for itself. I’ll rush through the paperwork. I believe you’re on Lovegood’s service, currently.”

“Yes. Luna likes me. Abbott does not like it,” Astoria said, preening now. She looked far more satisfied than she had since she had come to England.

Draco wondered how he had missed how much she was enjoying St. Mungo’s.

Dumbledore snorted and hummed. “You’ll need to try to work with her. As part of a team,” he said, sounding quite serious.

Astoria nodded. “I will.”

‘Try’ was not in Astoria’s vocabulary. Only ‘do’.

“And now, you, Mr. Malfoy,” Dumbledore began.

“Spell Damage,” Draco said immediately.

He’d be placed with McGonagall, he knew. In a perfect world, he’d get Riddle, but the man was currently being led by his cock by Harry Potter. So, in this non-perfect world, he’d get the next best Spell Damage specialist. He’d seen some of McGonagall’s work. She was no proper genius but—

“I think not.”

Draco’s mind went blank for a long moment.

“*Excusez-moi*?” Draco blurted out. “*Je veux*—”

“*S’il vous plaît, Monsieur*," Dumbledore said with a perfect accent. Draco jerked back and looked at him, wide-eyed. "Mr. Malfoy, I believe there's a better place for you. That better fits your skill set."

“I’ve *always* trained to be a Spell Damage specialist. There is no better place for me,” Draco said firmly.

“I think not,” Dumbledore corrected. “I observed you yesterday in the E&T department. You were working with Mr. Weasley.”

Draco froze and he bit his lower lip. Astoria glared at him from the corner of her eye.

“*What did you do*?” she hissed out in rapid French, almost too fast for a native speaker to catch. “*Were you using Legilimency again? You’re not licensed, Draco.*”

“He was,” Dumbledore said. They both looked at him again, surprised and suspicious. “Using Legilimency, I mean. Mr. Malfoy, you are quite talented. You held perfect control of the situation at hand, calming your fellow Healer while maintaining difficult spellwork. I commend you.”

“Thank you,” Draco muttered, looking down.

Dumbledore leaned forward. “It’s why I’d like you to consider joining the Mind Healing department as my student.”

Draco’s breath stopped once more and he looked up, wild-eyed. “Me?”

“Yes. You.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry watched Hermione with the fascination of someone watching a dragon gorge itself on raw meat. Hermione rolled her eyes, opened her mouth to say something, and then thought better of it, stuffing the second half of her lemon poppy seed muffin into her mouth. She mumbled something around her breakfast food for dinner and then looked back down at her charts.

“You’re eating like Ron,” Harry observed.

Hermione glared up at him, wounded by the comparison. She swallowed hard, wincing in discomfort. “I am...*stressed*,” she snapped.

“Why?” Harry scoffed. “You said your procedure last night went well.”

“It...did. Vance and I are working on the paper. On unicorn stitches and scarring caused by Dark creatures. It’s a lot of work. I’ve been compiling previous cases for the literature review, but it’s so hard to find cases similar to your sister’s. When people are attacked by werewolves, they’re usually *transformed*,” Hermione snapped pointedly.

Of course, she was also stressed about the fact that she was going to need to tell Harry that she was currently shagging their close friend and that she was growing...*feelings*, but that was neither here nor there.

“That means you have to eat like a monster?” Harry teased.

Hermione huffed again. “I’ve found a few cases that aren’t in English. But, I don’t know any translation spells. Sometimes, I miss the Hogwarts library.”

“I *never* miss Hogwarts,” Harry said, almost self-righteously, as he polished off his dinner.

Hermione frowned. “Why?”

“Regrettable choices. Regrettable boys. Regrettable friends. Or no friends. I had no friends,” Harry said blankly. “My only friends were my sister and my boyfriend at the time. I wasn’t likable.”

“You still aren’t.”

“Why, thank you,” Harry said with a grin.

“I didn’t have friends either,” Hermione pointed out. “Only books. Books were good to me.”

Harry hummed. “Yeah, and now, you have zero social skills.”

“I have friends now!” Hermione said briskly. “*You* have no social skills.”

“Now, I have a best friend who I tell everything to you,” Harry said and he beamed at her.

Hermione’s good mood faltered. “I...yeah, about that—”

Harry leaned forward, his brow creasing into a frown, when suddenly an explosion of red sparks erupted from the end of his holly wand. Harry jumped up and Hermione was caught between exasperation, worry, and relief.

“Go!” Hermione barked.

Harry didn’t need to be told a second time.

He took off out of the cafeteria, a stream of red sparks following after him. As per usual, he didn’t wait for the lift, deigning to take the stairs three at a time until he emerged on the Spell Damage floor, his heart pounding. He could hear the commotion from the separate corridor that all of Tom’s patients would end up as he treated them.

Harry approached Katie Bell’s room, worried.

“What’s going on?” Harry rasped, clinging to the doorway. His chest was burning and he stared as Katie Bell convulsed on the bed, her arms strapped down again. Bile rose in his throat as he saw the black veins straining in her neck, the bloody crescents in her palm from

where she had clenched her hands into fists. Her glazed eyes stared absently at the ceiling, reflecting nothing but agony.

He didn't need to hear Tom say it.

"The treatment plan isn't working. Her magic is rebelling against itself again," Tom said quietly, observing from the corner of the room.

"She's in *pain*! Do something! Heal her!" Harry barked.

Tom looked at him, tilting his head. He watching Harry as if he'd never seen him before and suddenly, Harry felt an inexplicable rage for the man that he loved. He had been angry with Tom before, but he had never *hated* as much as he did in that single moment.

"I can't. She's been having this reaction every 6 hours when she gets the treatment potions. She has to get through the initial reaction before I can treat her," Tom said carefully.

Harry blanched, shaking his head. He tried to step forward, but Tom raised his wand, shaking his head. Harry's lips parted in shock and he blinked once.

"You're going to raise your wand against me because you don't want me to treat our *patient*?" Harry whispered.

Tom didn't flinch. "You're going to make it worse. Wait. I'm serious, Harry."

Harry scowled, but marched forward, ignoring Tom's wand. He reached forward, grabbing Katie Bell's legs, and watched her as she convulsed, foam dripping from the corner of her mouth. Tom was okay with allowing her to seize, but Harry would allow her the dignity that she deserved. He walked around the bed and mopped up the foam and spittle, brushing strands of her hair from her face as the black veins in her neck strained so hard, that he was terrified they would snap.

Her eyes were bloodshot and lost and filled with terror.

And then, the symptoms seemed to recede and she collapsed on the bed, wheezing. Harry ran his hand down her arm and Katie's hand snapped out, grabbing his hand with a surprising amount of strength. Harry's eyes widened.

"Miss Bell...Katie, can you hear me?" Harry asked firmly.

Katie heaved and turned her to the side. Almost immediately, Tom was at her side, holding her up as she expelled the bare contents of her stomach into the bin he had Conjured. Harry very carefully didn't cringe from the acidic smell of bile and potions. The faint smell of the Dark venom that had been in her body. She had emptied herself of anything that might help *or* harm her.

Except for the curse.

He glanced into the bin and winced.

Blood.

“Katie, I need to know that you can hear me,” Harry barked.

Katie moaned in exhaustion. In less than twenty-four hours, she had deteriorated at a much higher rate than she had before. She looked skeletal, her skin tight around her skull, cheeks hollowed. Her bright eyes had dulled, but she looked at Harry, never looking away.

“Will…” she began.

“Yes, Katie?” Harry whispered.

“You said...you said...you said that I’d *fly*...again.”

Harry wanted to cry. He looked over at Tom, but he didn’t need to hear the man’s voice to know what he wanted to say.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

DIAGNOSIS

Sometimes, Draco wasn’t sure what was happening but he knew, then, that really madness must mean genius in England. Because Albus Dumbledore was mad if he thought that Draco would be any help in an internal Mind Healing procedure at 10 pm, only 8 hours after being recruited for Mind Healing.

“Healer Dumbledore, I do not have any Mind Healing training at all,” Draco said quietly.

This was something he would admit freely. Lily had never had the aptitude for Mind Healing. She lacked the patience to deal with humanity. When she Healed, she could pretend that there weren't any emotions or feelings involved. It was the opposite of Mind Healing. It was messy and unpredictable, and you could never leave the theatre with a sense of accomplishment, because in the end, the progress made was all up to the patient.

“You are skilled in Legilimency and Occlumency,” Dumbledore said calmly as he reviewed his parchment.

“*Oui*, *mais*—”

“And you feel. Deeply,” Dumbledore said, not unkindly. Draco looked at him with wide eyes. “In Mind Healing, that is all you can do. Care. Do you care, Healer Malfoy?”

“Yes. I took an oath—”

“But, do you *care*, Healer Malfoy?” Dumbledore demanded.

Draco bit his thin bottom lip and nodded. “Ah, yes.”

“Good. Then, present the case, Healer Malfoy,” Dumbledore commanded.

Draco nodded weakly. “Kingsley Shacklebolt, codename: Lancer, downed in the field by a Nightmare Curse,” Draco said calmly. “You think that it’s evolved into Walrider Syndrome, though.”

Dumbledore hummed to himself. “Explain to me how that came to be.”

“The Nightmare Curse is like a Boggart in spell terms. It causes an individual experience their worst fears, enduring their worst nightmares. It was used to torture Auror Shacklebolt during his mission until he was recovered last week. During his captivity, it morphed into Walrider Syndrome,” Draco said calmly.

“And Walrider Syndrome is?”

“Walrider Syndrome is much like those that are Obscurials. It causes an individual’s magic to act out in the individual’s defense as they sleep. This is typically caused by trauma, but the fact that Auror Shacklebolt was being tortured was enough,” Draco said.

Dumbledore grinned. “You said you didn’t know anything about Mind Healing.”

“Everyone knows *that,*” Draco protested.

“I daresay that they do not,” Dumbledore countered. “Now, my boy, we will treat this quite delicately. First, we will reach into his mind to find the seat of this trauma—in the amygdala.”

“Sir, I can not—” Draco began, and then his voice cut out in frustration. His brow furrowed as he looked over at Dumbledore, as if weighing his choices. Then, in French, he blurted out, “*Sir, I don’t know enough about the brain. About Mind Healing. About—”*

“*Patience,*” Dumbledore insisted. “*You will learn. You will observe why I believe that you are well-suited for this path. Now, come with me into the theatre.*”

Without another word, Dumbledore strode forward, all confidence, and reluctantly, Draco followed after him. Draco couldn’t quite contain his awe. He had only ever looked into a magical theatre. He’d never been inside one himself.

It was so very quiet, and still.

It felt as if it were his own corner of the world, and all of his anxieties and nerves had been silenced by something ancient and powerful. The man—Shacklebolt—was lying prone on the floating stone slab, his head just slightly elevated, and quite *awake*. A matron was arranging the instruments that Dumbledore would need and she nodded at Dumbledore before stepping back, giving him space to work. As Dumbledore went forward, Draco hovered by the door, unsure.

“*Come closer, my boy. You can’t see from there,*” Dumbledore insisted.

Draco grunted and crept closer, uncertain. There was no room for bravado here. Dumbledore would see right through that. He stood at the old, wizened man's side, staring at the shining brown head. Dumbledore was going to open a man's skull. Draco had seen the brain in Hippocrates' Anatomy and the odd cadaver or even floating in a jar. But, never a *live* brain.

"Hello, Auror Shacklebolt," Dumbledore greeted, brightly.

Kingsley Shacklebolt *looked* like an Auror. He was a powerful-looking man, even in hospital robes, and he had the presence and calmness of a figure of authority. He quirked an eyebrow at Draco but didn't question the uncertainty on his face.

"It's good to see you, Albus. I wish it were under better circumstances," Kingsley said.

Draco nearly flushed. The man had a *very* nice voice. If Draco wasn't as much about pussy as he currently he was, he would climb the man like a tree. But, of course, currently, he was dedicated to a queen among men, though Astoria rarely had time for him these days. Not that she really ever addressed the fact that he was clearly in love with her.

At least, he wasn't a freak about it like Snape was.

"As do I. This is my student, Draco Malfoy," Dumbledore said.

Kingsley's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Malfoy? Any relation to Lucius Malfoy?"

"Unfortunately," Draco muttered. Kingsley's eyes widened then, in surprise. "He's my father."

"I wasn't aware that Lucius had a son. Is your mother Narcissa?" Kingsley asked.

"Yes. She got away. Thank Merlin," Draco mumbled and then, he looked at Dumbledore again, almost pleading. Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

"We'll have you back in the field as soon as possible, Auror Shacklebolt. I do promise you," Dumbledore said with all the confidence in the world.

"I believe you," Kingsley said. A sly look entered his eye. "I don't think your student does."

Draco sputtered, his cheeks a bright pink.

"I just...I've never seen anything like this before! Will you be awake?" Draco asked.

"He doesn't know my case, eh, Albus?" Kingsley laughed at Draco's expense. "Or anything about what's happening?"

"He knows your case. I've just...neglected to tell him specifics of the procedure," Dumbledore said genially, as if the life of a patient didn't depend on Draco knowing *specifics*.

"Healer Dumbledore...what does the Auror mean?" Draco demanded, probably shorter than he should be with the Head Healer of St. Mungo's, but really, he thought the man deserved it.

“To access the amygdala, we will need to enter the temporal lobe. We must detect the damage. Walrider Syndrome leaves a mark. It is as simple as removing that mark. Like Banishing a ghost. A mark that hides,” Dumbledore said, quite calmly. “I need you to use Legilimency to trigger a nightmare. Instead of suppressing brain activity, I want you to increase it so that it triggers a fear response.”

“What does that do?” Draco asked.

“Nothing. It will simply allow me to know that the Walrider Syndrome is present and then, I can Banish it. This will end the symptoms for a time. In truth, this procedure will inform our treatment plan,” Dumbledore said quite calmly. Even as he spoke, he was dragging his wand over the left side of the man’s brain, from his temple, curving in front of his ear in a large misshapen-U.

Draco’s brow furrowed. “It cannot be so simple. After the mark is removed, it is over?”

“Of course not. We can remove the mark, but it won’t be over. That’s when the hard work begins. We’ll *treat* the trauma itself. Not just the symptoms,” Dumbledore said. His eyes brightened as he looked up at Draco, and his lips curled into a soft smile. “You care, Mr. Malfoy?”

Draco swallowed. He nodded. “I care.”

“Good. Cast the spell.”

And Draco went to stand in front of Kingsley Shacklebolt and slowly lifted his wand. Kingsley grinned at him, nodding.

“You’ll do fine,” Kingsley assured him. “This isn’t my first time on the end of a trainee’s wand.”

Draco huffed and swallowed hard, nodding.

“Okay. *Legilimens*.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Call it.”

Harry stared, his hands gripping the cold, cold feet. Her ankles were so thin. She was so stiff. Harry knew—logically—that that’s what happened when met with a dead person. He’d read about dead people. He’d seen one before, in a casket—when Lily’s mother had died. But, he had never seen one in a hospital bed.

Hospital beds were supposed to mean you were going to be saved.

They were supposed to mean that you were going to get better.

Katie Bell didn't get better.

"What?" Harry whispered.

"Call time of death," Tom repeated, her voice so calm that it shocked Harry out of his stillness. Harry spun to face Tom, his eyes blazing with fury.

"How can you be so callous? A woman just *died*. We just killed *her*!" Harry roared, slamming his fist into Tom's chest. Tom grabbed his wrist before he could do it again, and Harry's eyes widened when he realized what he'd just done. He flinched back, a hand clapping over his mouth as terrible sob ripped free from his mouth. "I-I'm s-sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"I know," Tom said, still so calm. And then, he said, "Time of death?"

Harry let out another sob. "5:23 am."

"Good," Tom said and then he hauled Harry from the room, tucking him close to his side. He stopped, looking to the matron that stood outside of the door. Miriam Strout stood as if she hadn't heard Harry's breakdown. "Matron Strout, if you could firecall the family and ask for them to wait in the lobby, I would greatly appreciate it."

"Of course, Healer," Matron Strout said before she marched away.

Harry fell against Tom, swallowing his sobs as Tom escorted him into his office, setting him down in the sofa against the wall. Tom kneeled in front of him, pressing his hands against Harry's thighs, looking up at him with narrowed maroon eyes. Harry's head fell forward and he let out another terrible sob, tears dripping down his nose and he shivered. He sounded as if he were dying, but he couldn't...he couldn't. *Stop. Fucking. Crying.*

"We killed her," Harry sobbed.

Tom shook his head. "Sweetheart, we didn't kill her. Sometimes, people just die. And there's nothing we can do about it."

"It's our job to *save* her," Harry moaned through his tears.

Tom smiled an empty smile, as if this was a lesson he had learned long ago.

"No. It's our job to do everything that we possibly can. We try our fucking hardest. We take extreme measures. And we did. And if that doesn't save her, then, we make her comfortable. *That's* the job."

"If we did everything we could, she would be alive," Harry snapped.

"You sat on her chest and you did heart compressions for twenty minutes."

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't enough."

“We aren’t God. No matter how much we want to be. I would know,” Tom said softly. He reached up, thumbing the tears from Harry’s face, and this smile seemed warmer and he leaned back on his haunches, humming.

Harry wiped away his tears, sniffling to himself, shaking.

“I’m sorry. I failed,” Harry whispered.

“We did fail.”

Harry looked up, sharp and wide-eyed.

Tom looked cross with himself. “But, tomorrow is another day. And there are more patients who we need to save. Someone’s mother. Someone’s kid. Someone’s husband. They need us to save them because they can’t save themselves. So, we learn from this, better ourselves, and we will be better, next time.”

“What if I’m not?” Harry asked, suddenly terrified.

“You will be.”

“How can you know that?” Harry said snippily.

“Because he was your one,” Tom said, sighing, looking up at the ceiling. “My one was a man named Gellert Grindelwald. Do you know who he is?”

Harry shook his head, slowly. “No.”

“He was Albus’ partner. He dabbled in things that he wasn’t equipped to dabble in. And he died on my table,” Tom said, sounding lost for a moment. For a moment, he sounded years younger, as young as he had when Gellert Grindelwald died on him. “He was my one. Katie Bell is your one. Every patient you treat, you’ll see Katie Bell’s face and remember that she was the one that died on your watch. She will haunt you. But, she will make you work harder, and she will make you better. Or she’ll make you quit. You’re not a quitter, Harry Potter. Are you?”

Harry shook his head again. “No.”

“Okay,” Tom announced, clapping his hands together. He waved his wand, and the sheet pulled up over Katie Bell’s face. “Your shift is over.”

“Now, what?” Harry asked.

Tom gave a dry, morbid smile. “Now, we try again.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright. That happened.

Told you there would be difficulties. Also, I get a lot of my Healing ideas—though not all—from this site: http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com

Next chapter will be more cutesy. Less angst. More fun romantic comedy-esque bullshit.

Finally: I LOVE your comments. They make me so happy. I love when you ask questions, and I appreciate your kudos. Keep giving me opportunities to engage with you all. Thanks for reading!

EDIT:

Akelarre Snake

Nightmare Curse - http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/76780150822/spell-name-nightmare-curse-incantation-tantibus

Walrider Syndrome - http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/160636082594/walrider-syndrome-the-name-for-the-way-in-which-a

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m going to do it.”

“Do it.”

“I’m going to do it.”

“I just said ‘do it’.”

“I’m going to march right up to him and give him this croissant and a cup of Earl Grey tea in a to-go cup,” Bellatrix Black announced, clutching both items tightly in her hands.

Rodolphus looked at her, bored. “Go for it.”

Bellatrix still didn’t move.

“He’s going to hate it. It’s not from the bakery near his flat. It’s from the dining hall here. Sure, it’s homemade, but it’s not the same. He’s going to taste that it’s not the same,” Bellatrix said, sounding crestfallen. She looked at Rodolphus, wide-eyed and helpless.

Rodolphus stared back at her, unimpressed. Slowly—so very slowly—he took a bite of his scone and then dropped the rest of it into the trash can, his lips curled. Bellatrix made a face of disgust at him and looked back over at the man of the hour.

Tom stood right next to the Information Desk, distractedly looking between the entrance—probably waiting for Harry-fucking-Potter—and the file in hand. He had a quill in his hand, the end of the feather pressed between plush pink lips. Merlin, Bellatrix missed those lips. She missed any lips. The last time that she had had satisfactory sex was...well, when she'd fucked Rodolphus, thus cheating on the perfect man with the perfect pink lips and perfect burgundy eyes. Sometimes, Bellatrix hated herself for giving up utter perfection for a tiny sliver of affection and attention. She and Tom would've made the most beautiful children.

“Don’t be a coward, Bella. Go,” Rodolphus snapped.

Bellatrix snapped into action. Briskly, she marched forward, her heels clicking against the floor, her chin held high. She could feel everyone's eyes on her. By now, they all knew the sordid, sordid tale of Tom Riddle, Bellatrix Black, and Harry-fucking-Potter, featuring Rodolphus Lestrange. They were all vultures, feeding on scraps of gossip.

Tom hadn’t looked up from his paper, though his lips were curled into a sneer. So, he knew it was her.

“Good morning, Tom,” Bellatrix said, coolly.

“Did you need something?” Tom drawled, refusing to look up. He looked a little paler than usual, up close, but that didn’t have to mean anything.

Tom never got sick anyway.

“No. Have you eaten breakfast?” Bellatrix asked and then hated herself.

If he said ‘yes’, she’d look fucking stupid, holding breakfast in her hand.

“I’m not eating breakfast with you.”

Bellatrix swallowed. “I wasn’t...it’s our breakfast. A croissant and a cup of Earl Grey tea,” Bellatrix said, throwing it out in front of her, nearly tossing it into his chest.

Tom looked up, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “This is a clumsy attempt to poison me. Isn’t it?”

“No. It’s just tea and bread, Tom. Merlin, why are you so fucking suspicious?” Bellatrix demanded angrily and Tom raised an eyebrow.

“Probably because I found my best friend and fiance fucking in my bed.”

“Ugh, please, just take it,” Bellatrix snarled.

Tom hummed and took it from her gingerly as if touching her would give him hives. Bellatrix waited, rocking back and forth on her heels.

“I’m not going to *thank* you.”

Bellatrix scoffed and turned on her heel to storm away. She stopped when she heard a terrible wretching sound. She made eye contact with Rodolphus, but he was practically cackling, staring at something behind her. Bellatrix turned around as she heard another gagging sound and she winced when she saw Tom doubled over, croissant half-eaten and tea spilled on his shiny black shoes.

Tom jolted once, twice, and then vomited, a spew of yellow bile and pieces of croissant on the ground.

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” Bellatrix whispered under her breath.

Tom grabbed at his knees, his files on the ground beside him—thankfully untouched by bile. He breathed heavily, all eyes on him for a long moment. And then Tom straightened, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his robes, burgundy eyes blazing with utter fury.

“You poisoned me, you heinous bitch!” Tom roared. “I’ll *kill* you.”

“I didn’t! It was just a fucking croissant!” Bellatrix said as Tom crushed the remnants of the poor croissant under his vomit-covered shoe.

Rodolphus snorted as he stumbled forward, wand held aloft. He muttered the diagnostics charm.

“Mate, you’re not poisoned. You’re fucking *ill*.”

Tom punctuated his former best friend’s word with a well-timed upchuck.

DIAGNOSIS

Neville wanted to kill himself. Non-literally, of course.

He would be happy if he could quit being a Healer. Just for the day.

Graduating from Hogwarts was supposed to mean no more tests. Except, every day with Severus Snape felt like a fucking test, and Sprout seemed to have joined in on him. He chewed on the end of his quill as he finished off the short response about the eleven uses of dragon blood. It didn’t really look like a short response anymore. Neville knew Snape—he’d fail him on principle for lack of the tiniest detail and Neville couldn’t afford to fail a single skills lab. He wasn’t going to fail out of being a Healer and end up working that apothecary job that his Gran had tried to push him into.

Gran had said that he didn’t have the drive for Healing. His parents had disagreed with her, but Neville still heard her disparaging voice sometimes. The old biddy.

“There are twelve.”

Neville blinked, looking up sharply. He jumped violently, nearly spilling his inkwell all over his work.

Astoria Greengrass was standing just over his shoulder, peering steadily down at his parchment.

“W-what? You made *no* noise. Do you know that? What the fuck?” Neville breathed, his heart beating harshly in his chest.

Astoria tilted her head. “*Non. Douze*. Twelve ways. It can be used as an oven cleaner,” Astoria insisted. She waited for just a moment before she fell into the seat next to him, her legs crossed at the ankles. Neville turned to look at her, a deer in headlights. Astoria either didn’t care about his discomfort or simply didn’t notice. “And here, he wants you to divide the potion ingredients, but not by *what* they are exactly. In Potioneering, ingredients are divided into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary.”

“What?” Neville repeated, assaulted by the onslaught of information.

Astoria’s brow furrowed.

“It is too much...in English. You should learn French,” Astoria said sharply.

Neville blanched. “Okay, what—”

“Neville, sweetheart, how are you—what is *she* doing here?” Hannah asked, her eyes narrowing on Astoria with the sharpness of a dragon. “Luna is looking for you.”

“No, she is not,” Astoria said calmly. She looked back at Neville, that strange look in her eyes again. She tilted her head. “You are nicer than your companions.”

“What?”

Neville felt like the only word he knew was ‘what’.

“Ron Weasley makes caustic remarks at the expense of those around him in order to compensate for the inferiority he feels due to his family’s lack of wealth. Hermione Granger demonstrates signs of emotional stuntedness because of her notions of superiority. And Harry Potter uses sarcastic humor and sharp barbs to hide his non-existent self-esteem.”

Hannah’s jaw dropped. “Shit,” she hissed.

“But. Not you. You are kind. I like you,” Astoria said, her voice stilted. She said this all very clinically and then, carefully—very carefully—reached out to grab Neville’s hand in both of hers. She pulled him closer. “We should break out fast together.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Hannah grumbled. “You already stole my mentor, that case with the boy with a snout, and now, you want to steal my *man*? Neville, why are so many people trying to take you away from me?”

Neville neatly hid a smile behind his hand as he went over his paper and began to make the corrections that Astoria had insisted on.

“I am not trying to…‘steal your man’,” Astoria said carefully. “I already have one.”

“Oh. So, Draco and you *are*...” Neville muttered to himself. He was silenced by Hannah’s furious glare and he sat pin-straight again, staring at Astoria’s ear. Her eye contact was a little too much for him.

"We are something," Astoria said dismissively. "The Head Healer hypothesized that making human connections with other hospital personnel would allow me to flourish as a Healer. I am conducting the experiment, in order to prove his hypothesis true."

Neville’s brow furrowed as he tried to dissect her words. He gasped, eyes widened.

“Wait...are you trying to be...*friends*?” Neville asked, slowly.

Astoria’s eyes lit up and a terribly strange, unholy smile spread across her face. She definitely practiced that smile in the mirror. “*Friends.*”

DIAGNOSIS

“Good morning!” Harry said as cheerfully as possible as he walked into the patient’s room. He’d had a good morning. Ron and Neville had made breakfast, so it was a nice frittata and well-made coffee. He’d been well-rested and had only followed up on cases for the first two hours of his shift. For the past week, Harry and Tom had only had regular Spell Damage cases—none that were particularly mortal—and no one had died.

He glanced at Tom and blanched.

Tom Riddle looked like death incarnate. He was ashen in his dark green robes that smelled like they had been artificially cleaned with magic. His cheeks looked hollowed and there were dark smudges of exhaustion under his burgundy eyes.

“Are you alright?” Harry murmured, casting a look at the patient in the oversized bed.

"Present...ugh, present the case," Tom mumbled. He rubbed his throat gently, massaging it, and then, looked over at Harry again. He sneered at the worry in Harry's eyes.

Harry pursed his lips and turned to the patient. She was a mousy looking woman with wispy grey hair. “Mafalda Hopkirk, age 55—”

“47,” Mafalda corrected with a squeak.

Harry swallowed his grin. “My mistake. Diagnosis: rapidly deteriorating from a poorly done Withering Curse. Ms. Hopkirk is an assistant in the Office of Improper Use of Magic. I imagine that’s how you were hit with a Withering Curse, eh?”

Mafalda gave a weak smile and she nodded, leaning back and snuggling into her pillows. Harry felt a sense of sadness for her, glancing down at the woman. The Withering Curse was presenting more as an extremely accelerated Vanishing Disease. Her nails were all missing, leaving fleshy stubs, and he could see the way her teeth were beginning to erode. Harry hated fatal illnesses—it always ended up with the disease or curse eating away at the patient, turning them inside out and destroying everything that they were.

It was horrifying.

Harry tore his gaze away and looked over at Tom. He frowned.

Tom’s hand was pressed against his mouth for a long moment and he looked vaguely green, far from his usual composure. He swallowed long and hard before he stood up straight again. He reached into his cloak for something.

“Excuse me,” Tom murmured.

As he walked from the room, Harry saw a flash of something that might be a Pepper-Up Potion. The door clicked shut behind the man. Harry turned back to Mafalda and she looked

concerned.

“Is he alright?” Mafalda asked. “He looks ill.”

“Healer Riddle is never ill,” Harry said with such conviction that he shocked himself. Yet, he vehemently believed his words. Tom was always on form. He seemed above human things like illness—probably an unhealthy way to view someone that Harry thought might very possibly be the love of his life. “Now, let’s talk through the Withering Curse. As you know —”

And the door swung open again and Tom stepped through, looking far better than he had in the last hour of Harry being in his presence.

“The Withering Curse is presenting as an accelerated Vanishing Disease. Your fingernails have disappeared. Your teeth will be next,” Tom said clinically. Mafalda looked horrified and she sputtered, attempting to interrupt. Tom paid her no mind. “Teeth can be replaced. This buys us time.”

“How so?” Mafalda asked.

"Vanishing Disease functions differently than most diseases. Most diseases travel through the blood and are constantly in your body. With Vanishing Disease, it targets an organ and then will go dormant for a period. Cartilage and bone are the hardest to Vanish. We will focus on finding a cure while it goes after your teeth," Tom said firmly.

Mafalda looked overwhelmed by the information. Harry forced a smile on his face and nodded, hoping that it was natural. Tom spoke so rigidly that he sometimes forgot about the humanity of his patients.

“What would be next?” Mafalda asked.

“Well...we can’t be sure. Every strain of Vanishing Disease is different and we’ve never really seen a Withering Curse performed on a person,” Harry said honestly. Mafalda looked a bit green. Harry rushed to finish his thought. “But, we’re doing as much research as possible. As you know, from the consent form, we have the full resources and backing of the Department of Mysteries. We’ll do all that is in our power to keep you alive, and then some.”

Harry glanced at Tom and hated himself for looking for approval. He didn't find it. Tom's brow was furrowed and he was beginning to look a little ill again. His skin looked almost waxy, except for his nose which seemed red. Almost unconsciously, he rubbed at it, and then looked up at Harry with narrowed eyes.

“We’ll be sending out for all of the information now. If you need anything, Ms. Hopkirk, there will be a matron here every fifteen minutes,” Tom announced.

Mafalda nodded. “Thank you, Healer Riddle.”

Tom nodded and stormed from the room, without the usual flare he had.

Harry’s eyes narrowed.

Something wasn't right.

DIAGNOSIS

"He hated it," Bellatrix moaned into her lunch, her stomach turning at even the thought of consuming it.

"I'm not sure if he hated the croissant or your face," Rodolphus said with a roguish grin. Bellatrix promptly flipped the bird at him. His grin only grew wider. "He's never going to want to talk to us again, you know. We fucked him over."

"He was paying attention only to his work!" Bellatrix snarled. "He dismissed your accomplishments, dismissed me, locking himself away with those case studies and those files for hours and hours—"

"And we fucked him over," Rodolphus reiterated, cutting her off.

Bellatrix stopped short and huffed. "It was stupid to think a croissant and Earl Grey tea would make up for it."

"He's been that way all of his life, Bella. We both knew that. We knew that he was hyper-focused and neurotic. We knew we'd always be second," Rodolphus reminded her and Bellatrix pretended that it was a lie, looking away from Rodolphus with a quiet sneer.

"I wasn't supposed to be second," Bellatrix whispered. "Harry fucking Potter isn't second."

"Isn't he?" Rodolphus asked, with a raised eyebrow. "Well...you *made* him second."

"What was I supposed to do?" Bellatrix snapped back, her head snapping around. Rodolphus raised an eyebrow, waiting for her rage. Bellatrix wouldn't give him the satisfaction of receiving it. "*We* fucked *him* over? He fucked *me* over, and he still got it all. He wasn't going to leave me...high and dry for *him*. He wasn't going to win and make me the villain."

"No, you did that yourself," Rodolphus retorted. Bellatrix's shoulders slumped. "You've always been quick to make yourself the wicked fairy godmother, Bella."

"Doesn't it bother you?" Bellatrix asked, her voice cracking.

Rodolphus' eyes narrowed. "Of course it does."

"You act like it doesn't," she snapped back.

"You're not the only one who lost their best friend. You're just the only one that pretends that we didn't do something *wrong.* We did something *wrong*," Rodolphus snapped back, shutting her up effectively. His gaze didn't soften when Bellatrix deflated in on herself again.

“I want to talk to him again. I miss him. I want him to love me again,” Bellatrix whispered. Then, she jerked, looking up at Rodolphus with wide eyes. And then, though she didn’t know why, she said, “But not the same way as before.”

Rodolphus didn’t say anything immediately.

“I fucked over my best friend,” Rodolphus muttered, shaking his head. He sounded more disappointed than surprised. Then, he looked up and gave a terribly sad smile. “I would do it again.”

Bellatrix flinched away as she always did. She always flinched away from sincerity.

She’d never flinched from Tom, hissed the lizard brain.

Fuck the lizard brain.

Bellatrix got up, shaking her head. "I have paperwork to do and a student to test. He needs to know all of the hit wizard and Aurors codenames and I want to throw him into a skills lab."

Rodolphus opened his mouth to say something, but a loud terrible sound interrupted them.

Bellatrix twitched when she heard the sound of vomiting. Everyone in the cafeteria spun to face the stupid trainee—Smith or something—as he spewed bile all over the floor, in an eerie comparison to Tom that morning. Lovegood was immediately at his side, her wand pull and pointed at him. Bellatrix watched her cast the diagnostics spell.

“Oh, hell,” Rodolphus murmured.

Lovegood straightened, looking far more alert than she usually did.

“Okay, this cafeteria is on lockdown,” Lovegood announced with an authority that no one dared challenge for just a moment.

And then, the rioting happened.

"What do you mean ‘lockdown'?" Snape snarled from his little corner of the room—little worm, Bellatrix sneered in her head. He was always so eager to either have Lily or Tom's attention and scorned them both in the next, too wrapped up in his own inferiority.

"I mean that this trainee has the Black Cat Flu. It's extremely contagious and has an incubation of at least three days. That means he was exposed to it, three days ago. And he's been coming here. Working around *patients* and around *you*," Luna said, her voice very hard and serious, as she looked around at all of them, "which means all of *you* are now exposed to the pathogen. This room is on lockdown.”

Bellatrix and Rodolphus exchanged heavy looks.

Rodolphus let his head fall to the table with a heavy thump. “Fuck.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Are you bloody fucking shitting me?”

Ron stared at his girlfriend in wide-eyed amusement. Hermione looked particularly murderous after Smith’s undoing and Luna’s announcement. Neville winced at the terrible vulgar language that had spewed forth from Hermione’s mouth. It was most like her and still so very unlike her that it was enough to make Hannah jump.

"I know," Ron drawled. He could see her winding up for a rant. All that Hermione required of him when she worked herself up were nods, firm affirmations, and a few ‘of course's and a ‘you're right' to punctuate it all.

“How did you get sick with the Black Cat Flu? How does *anyone* still get sick with the Black Cat Flu? There’s a vaccine!” Hermione practically shrieked. Her fists were clenched so tight that her knuckles were going white. “We are *Healers.* And we’re quarantined so we can’t *do* that. What are we supposed to do about our patients? What if someone needs an emergency procedure? What if a matron misses a dosage of a Pain-Relieving Potion? What if—"

“I think everything will be fine,” Hannah interrupted.

Ron tutted. Big mistake.

“Hannah…” Neville began warningly.

Hannah acted as if she hadn’t heard him. “The matrons are highly trained and you’re not the only Healer who can do what you do. You’re pretty good, Granger, but you’re not God. They can have a few hours without you before things fall apart.”

Ron grinned.

Larger mistake.

Hermione turned her laser-sharp gaze on Hannah, slowly pulling her apart with her eyes alone. Hannah shifted under Hermione's stare, but she didn't falter. Instead, her chin jerked up, as if challenging Hermione to correct her. Hermione's eyes brightened. She'd always flourished under challenges.

“No,” Hermione corrected. “Smith is pretty good. Patil is pretty good. *You’re* pretty good. But, I’m great.”

Ron snorted into his hand. “Yeah, you are,” he muttered under his breath.

Hermione beamed at him as if she'd heard him anyway.

“You’re still a trainee, Granger,” Hannah snapped.

“And you’re *barely* a trainee, Abbott,” Hermione said, just as scathing.

Neville groaned and looked at Ron. “Please tell your girlfriend to stop bullying my girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” Hannah squeaked.

“Ron can’t tell me to do *anything*,” Hermione sneered. She looked at Ron with suspicion, her eyes narrowed. Ron stared back amused. She smelled more like coconut oil than usual. He’d watched her do her hair routine that morning, and she’d put more than usual, citing dryness, not that Ron had noticed. “You don’t think you can tell me what to do, do you?”

“I wouldn’t even try,” Ron said solemnly.

Hermione’s sneer melted away into a pleased smile. “Good,” she said, leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek.

“Oh, do we do that now?” Ron asked. “Does Harry know?”

Hermione winced. “Well, not yet…”

“Wait...how doesn’t *Harry* know?” Neville demanded. “You’re in each other’s personal space nearly constantly.”

“I’ve been...busy,” Hermione muttered.

That was technically not a lie.

"So, he doesn't know. How do you not tell your best friend that you have a boyfriend? I don't even work with my best friend and she knows all about Neville," Hannah beamed. Neville's lips curled into a sickly sweet smile, and they leaned forward, pressing their lips together in a quick peck.

Ron and Hermione exchanged horrified glances.

“We’re never going to do that. Or be that. It’s gross,” Ron said firmly.

“Then, we’re in agreement. None of that,” Hermione said sharply. Hannah scowled and shook her head as if she thought there was something wrong with *them.*

“You should tell Harry. Ron shouldn’t feel like you’re ashamed of him,” Hannah scolded.

“I don’t really feel that way,” Ron said, but Hannah continued as if she hadn’t heard him.

Looking very much like a lecturing professor, she said, “The basis of a healthy relationship is trust, communication, and honesty. You two want to grow together. You can’t grow together if you’re not honest in your daily life.”

Hermione rolled her eyes so hard, she nearly hurt herself.

“Okay,” she sighed. She waved her wand, muttering, “*Tempus*.”

"I have a potion simmering," Neville sighed. "It's going to explode in forty-seven minutes."

“I have a paper to be researching and outlining. And I was supposed to bring back lunch for Vance. She’ll be starving,” Hermione said, sounding very dismayed.

“You’re not her secretary,” Ron pointed out.

Hermione frowned at him. “I’ll be anything she needs.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly grown a conscience,” Ron teased, sounding utterly delighted by the concept. Hermione just stared back at him, blankly. “Are you trying to make it up to her that we’re together? Because she doesn’t know.”

Hermione reared back. “What do you mean she doesn’t know?”

Ron paled.

Hermione leaned forward, her eyes flashing, but before she could reprimand the man, Luna was standing atop a table once more, Astoria standing at her side, back ramrod straight. When Astoria noticed them, she looked directly at Neville and waved, that odd “friendly” smile on her face. Astoria reached up to tug on the hem of Luna’s long vibrant robes and pointed. Luna nodded and crooked her finger at Hannah.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Hannah said, bending forward to press another quick peck to Neville’s lips before she bounced off to her teacher. As soon as she joined Luna’s side, Astoria was speaking quickly to her, and Luna had her wand pointed at her throat.

“*Sonorous*," Luna cast. Then, she looked at all of the Healers and the few visitors that had the un-luck of being trapped in with stir-crazy Healers. "Attention, Healers! I have formulated a plan to deal with this situation! My team and I will be handling this with the utmost care! My two trainees will go through staff records to determine who has been vaccinated! Until you've been cleared by *me*, you will not leave! That is my decision!”

There was a massive amount of uproar and irritation, everyone shouting questions, but Hermione only had eyes for Ron.

“Oh, fuck,” Ron muttered.

Hermione tilted her head and grinned.

“If I have to tell Harry...*you* have to tell Emmeline. Have fun with that.”

DIAGNOSIS

“The cafeteria is on lockdown,” Harry said, closing Tom’s door behind him quietly. He fiddled with his robes as he walked up to the man’s desk, rearranging the parchment into something resembling order. “I think someone has the Black Cat Flu and they’re afraid that it’ll spread to the patients. Lovegood thinks that it’s being transmitted through the food. Anway, they’re checking records to see who was vaccinated before they let anyone in or out.”

Tom didn’t say anything immediately.

“Hmm…”

“Tom, did you hear me?” Harry asked, finally looking up. He looked at Tom, eyes wide with surprise. Tom looked decrepit—even worse than he had that morning. His face was wan, and his hand was clenched tight around his quill as he scribbled on parchment. “What are you doing?”

"Writing…writing a strongly worded letter," Tom said, his voice slurring just slightly. Harry noticed the beads of sweat on his brow. "To...to the Auror office."

"About what?" Harry asked slowly as he went to the desk to look over the man's shoulder. He winced. The letter didn't have any of Tom's typically impeccable penmanship. It was a slanted mess with copious misspellings and stray ink blots.

“If the Auror office wasn’t…a mess of…bureaucracy than...we would’ve gotten the necklace. Could’ve helped Katie...Katie Bell,” Tom murmured, his lashes fluttering as he yawned into his sleeve. His head dipped for just a moment before he jerked up again. “Talk...to your father.”

“My father hates you, Tom,” Harry said with a tiny smile.

“Don’t...like him either,” Tom said like a petulant child. “Didn’t...do anything to him. Not...like...Black…”

Harry snorted. “He doesn’t like that you were inside of me and that I’m working for you.”

“*I* liked being inside of you,” Tom whispered, his head drooping again.

It was oddly cute—with emphasis on the word *odd.*

Harry leaned forward, pressing the back of his hand to Tom's forehead. He jumped at the scalding heat of the pale, waxy skin. Tom flinched away from his touch, rubbing at his hairline, combing his fingers through—he groomed himself like an overgrown cat.

“You’re burning up. You’re sick, Tom,” Harry said quietly.

“No. I’m not. I...I just...*was* sick. On my shoes,” Tom muttered.

Harry’s eyes softened. “Tom...come on. You can’t be here. You’re going to get people sick,” Harry said coaxing, and Tom looked up, his burgundy eyes burning strangely crimson with his irritation and illness.

“I’m a Healer. I don’t get sick,” Tom said pompously.

Cute. Cute, cute, cute.

Merlin, Harry hated this man.

“You’re sick, Tom. You have to go home. You’re going to make your patients sick and weaken their immune systems,” Harry said softly and he began to pack up the files, ignoring Tom’s squawks of irritation. He slid the messy letter back into a file and made a reminder to himself to rewrite it and send it off to his father. James would much rather hear from him.

Harry hadn't had a real conversation with his father since James and Sirius had made arses of themselves. This would be a good enough way to break the ice. Or whatever.

“Hmmm,” Tom hummed. “I’m not sick.”

Harry rolled his eyes and cast the diagnostics charm. "In the most unsurprising news of the year, you are confirmed *sick.* I’m pretty sure you have the Black Cat Flu. You didn’t get vaccinated, did you?”

“I’m a Healer. I don’t get sick,” Tom repeated. He sounded a little more unsure this time.

Harry rolled his eyes and took Tom by his hand, pulling him out of his chair. Tom stumbled just a bit before righting himself, leaning heavily into Harry’s side.

“You can’t take care of yourself,” Harry chastised. “Come on. We’ll go to my house. You definitely have a fever. And you were sick earlier. Are you in pain?”

“I’m sore,” Tom snapped.

Harry snorted. “That’s charming. Snapping at the person who’s going to take care of you.”

Tom leered, his hazy burgundy eyes burning as he looked up and down at Harry. “You’ll be a very good matron. Very sexy.”

“No. None of that,” Harry chastised.

Tom’s gaze still made Harry feel naked. Tom always looked at him like he’d seen him naked.

Harry gathered the files close to his chest. He could do work back at Grimmauld Place while Tom rested. Tom was silent as Harry led him down the hallway and to the lift. The man’s head lolled back and he looked far less put-together. Harry could see how out of it he was, and he felt both pity and a hint of elation. Tom looked *human.* He was sick. He was normal. He was nothing but a man.

A man.

“Hold onto me,” Harry commanded as they entered the Apparition Zone. He squeaked when Tom’s arm wrapped around his waist and the taller man dragged him in, pressing Harry’s face against his neck. “I meant, like,...to my arm.”

“This is nicer.”

Harry prepared to argue and then shook his head, and focused on Apparating. The unpleasant feeling of Apparating occurred. Everything went black and Harry was being compressed. He couldn't breathe and his eyeballs were being forced back into his head. His eardrums popped terribly and then, he was on his doorstep.

Tom groaned, pushing Harry away, and then, he was promptly sick on the stoop. Harry winced as the mess spilled slightly down the first two steps, and the smell of sour bile wafted through the air. Tom fell back against the door, wiping at his mouth. Harry glanced down the deserted street—it was still a little before the Muggles got home. He pulled his wand.

“*Evanesco,*” he muttered, and the sick Vanished. The smell still lingered. Harry looked back at Tom. The man wasn’t looking at him. He looked angry, almost, but also contrite. Harry’s lips curled in amusement. “Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Tom retorted.

Harry laughed softly, going to unlock the door. “Okay,” he said gently. Tom stormed past him into the house, going straight up the stairs. Harry laughed to himself as he followed Tom to his bedroom. “Get in bed. I’ll get you potions.”

Tom was already stripping off his work robes, leaving him shirtless, in just a pair of tight black pants. He turned around to inspect the sheets, and Harry allowed himself a moment of weakness. Tom was still so bloody fit, even after Harry had literally just seen him spew vomit all over his steps. His back muscles shifted as he tapped his wand against his pants, Transfiguring them into a pair of silky black sleep pants. Harry salivated. Merlin, those shoulders, his back, his waist...his fucking arse.

Tom turned around and Harry promptly looked at the ceiling.

“Were you ogling me?” Tom drawled, a hint of a smile in his voice.

“No. Because friends don’t ogle friends. And we can only be friends,” Harry snapped.

“Can we?” Tom taunted, taking a step forward.

“Yes,” said Harry, raising his wand, and looking at Tom again. “Now, get in the bed and wait there while I get your potions.”

“Yes, Healer,” Tom said salaciously and he chuckled when Harry spun on his heel and stomped away, hiding his pink cheeks.

Harry sighed as he placed the files on his bathroom sink counter as he went to go through his medicine cabinet. He pulled out a bottle of Fever-Reducing Potion, a Pain-Relieving Serum for the soreness, and a Pepper-up potion for the stomach issues. He gathered them in one hand and he went back into his bedroom. He tried to keep his palpable relief off his face when he saw that Tom had done what he was told and was waiting in bed, mostly under the covers.

“Why are you under the covers?”

“It’s cold,” Tom said, sounding dangerously close to whining.

Harry pressed his lips together to keep from grinning. “Drink your potions. Are you hungry?”

“If I eat, I’ll be sick in your bed,” Tom muttered as he took the potions from Harry and took them in quick succession, throwing them back as if they were shots. He didn’t even grimace at the terrible aftertaste from the Pain-Relieving Serum.

Harry giggled to himself as he watched Tom’s stone cold expression as steam erupt from Tom’s ears.

“Okay. Let me know if you’re hungry. What do you usually eat when you’re sick?” Harry asked.

Tom’s eyes narrowed and he pressed his hand to his mouth to mask a yawn. “I don’t get sick.”

“But, if you did?” Harry prompted patiently.

“I usually enjoyed biscuits and Earl Grey from a bakery downstairs from my flat,” Tom allowed, and he suddenly seemed far away in a way that had nothing to do with his illness. Harry’s brow furrowed as he wondered what Tom was reminiscing about and he felt something unpleasant settle in the base of his spine. And then, Tom was back with him again, looking as aware as the potions allowed him to look. “But, I think that I’d like eggs. When I wake up.”

Harry grinned. “I can do that.”

“Oh, and those files—”

“Tom, go to *sleep*,” Harry snapped. “I’ll rewrite the letters to the Auror Office. And I think contacting the Department of Mysteries would be prudent too. You just get better. We have a case to work on tomorrow.”

Tom hummed, annoyed but willing to rest. Harry grabbed the files from the bathroom and with one more cursory look at Tom, he walked out of his bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

Harry leaned back against the door and let out a long breath.

Tom was in his bed again. Shirtless and sexy and ill, but still so, so sexy.

Fuck.

Tom was in *his* bed. Which Harry couldn’t *also* sleep in.

Harry frowned. “Where am I going to sleep?”

DIAGNOSIS

“I fucking hate my job.”

Ron and Neville exchanged amused looks as they watched Hermione busy herself in the kitchen, slamming pots and pans into their places as she put up the dishes from that morning. Ron opened his mouth to tease her, but Neville’s eyes narrowed and he pointed at the takeaway with the tines of his fork. Obediently, Ron shoveled more Indian food into his mouth, though his eyes were bright with amusement.

“You really don’t,” Neville said, gently.

“I hate that people are Healers, but *don’t* get vaccinated. Are you serious? It was too hard to go down to the pharmacy and take a fucking potion?” Hermione grumbled under her breath.

Ron tilted his head. “I think it is. We’re busy people with important jobs. Be serious. We only got vaccinated because Harry nagged us.”

“Untrue. I am up to date on *all* my vaccinations,” Hermione said imperiously. She shook her head, huffing under her breath. “An entire day wasted in the cafeteria. A whole shift. What if we don’t get paid for it?”

“Well, we didn’t do any work,” Ron pointed out.

Neville shrugged. “We also don’t pay rent.”

“We pay for groceries!” Hermione protested. “And take away. And alcohol. It’s expensive.”

"This is true," Ron acknowledged as he finished off his plate. Hermione was just finishing up with the dishes and she sat back down at the table, exhausted. She scraped at her plate, shoveling food into her mouth. "You still have time to do work. You've books and case files on the floor in the bedroom."

“Do you guys share a room?” Neville asked wide-eyed.

“We switch back and forth,” Ron said.

Neville tilted his head. “How do you decide?”

“We fuck in whichever bed and then fall asleep,” Hermione sighed.

Neville turned pink and Ron snorted. Hermione was far more tired than she was presenting.

“How has Harry not caught you yet? You two don’t have boundaries.”

“Because I know how to use Silencing Charms unlike Harry,” Ron countered with a grimace. All three of them remembered the night of the party. Harry had kept them up for *hours*. "This

is good takeaway though, which we wouldn't have bought if we weren't starving after being locked in a cafeteria and unable to eat anything. And now, we have eternal material for making fun of Smith."

“That’s a very low high point of the day,” Hermione said. “Vance is going to be on my arse. Sometimes, I wish I had a Time Turner like I did at Hogwarts.”

“You had a Time Turner?” Neville asked wide-eyed. “Why?”

"I took many electives during my third year," Hermione said, smirking with smug pride. Then, she deflated somewhat. "But, long-term use would've proven...exhausting and detrimental to my physical development."

“What?” Ron asked with a frown.

Neville grinned. “She was aging twice as fast and she knew she would fail her classes the next year if she kept working too hard.”

Hermione shrugged. “I know when to admit defeat.”

“Do you?” Ron asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes and finished her food, grabbing the styrofoam box and Vanishing it. As she went to wash her fork, a thought crossed her mind.

“Do you think Harry is back?” she asked.

Neville tilted his head, considering it. “I haven’t seen Harry since this morning. Not even at lunch.”

“He was supposed to meet us, wasn’t he?” Ron asked curiously.

Hermione hummed. “Maybe he got caught up? We can check his room,” Hermione decided. “We’ll let him know there’s takeaway if he so chooses to take part.”

She led them up the stairs in a train, taking charge as she did everywhere she went. Ron was suddenly glad that he hadn’t known Hermione when they were still at Hogwarts. He would’ve immediately dismissed her as a bossy know-it-all—which, she was, in fact—, but now he could appreciate her fully. It was all a part of her charm. A psychotic hag who put too much pressure on herself and the people around her without any social skills, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Hermione didn’t bother knocking on Harry’s door.

They weren’t really ‘knocking on door’ friends.

She stopped in the doorway, her hand clapping to her mouth to muffle her gasp.

“Holy shit,” Neville whispered. Ron and Hermione violently shushed him and Neville winced. He looked over at Hermione and Ron, but they were gaping at the man in Harry’s

bed too.

Tom Riddle looked very different asleep. He looked softer and kinder, his face half-hidden beneath plush pillows and the thick duvet. One arm was tossed over his face and he was mumbling under his breath. They took notice of the three empty potion vials on the nightstand. Neville looked back at Hermione and Ron, but they were tiptoeing across the bedroom floor.

Ron looked over his shoulder and beckoned Neville over. Neville scurried across, nearly tripping over his own feet. Neville looked over Hermione's head into the bathroom. He smothered his laughter in his hand.

And *there* was Harry, curled up in the bathtub, his head lolling back against a small throw pillow and a quilt laid over his chest.

DIAGNOSIS

Sleep. All he needed was more sleep. Sleep was the best. When sleeping, he didn't have to think about dying patients and disapproving mothers. He didn't have to worry about lying boyfriends or ill-found fiances. No long, *long* shifts. Sometimes, he didn't even see Katie Bell's face. He didn't have to worry about anything but sleep.

Except, someone was trying *very* hard to rip that way from him

"What...what are you doing?" Harry yawned softly as he felt himself being jostled against the porcelain of the tub. He blinked sleepily as Tom slipped into the tub, snuffling to himself. Harry felt the heat of the man as he slipped behind him and long arms wrapped around his middle, pulling Harry into the cradle of strong thighs, Harry's back to a hot chest.

"Mmm I'm lonely," Tom mumbled, bleary and exhausted.

"You're sick," Harry teased, unable to keep the tiny smile stretching over his face. Even as he protested, he tugged the threadbare quilt over them both. He could see Tom's feet pressed against the far lip of the tub.

He had long toes.

"Shhh."

"Gonna get me...sick…" Harry murmured even as he pressed his head against Tom's chest, and turned his cheek into the hard, hot skin.

"You were vaccinated. Now, shhh. Mm...tired," Tom hummed, his arms tightening around Harry's waist.

“You’re fucked up,” Harry said and he hated how fondly he sounded when he said it. Tom’s arms tightened impossibly, almost hard enough to bruise, and Merlin. Harry missed the bruises Tom used to give him—on his neck, on his thighs, on his waist. In the shape of his hands, in shape of his mouth. He missed the marks on Tom’s back. Harry missed having the history of them painted on their skin.

He missed making Tom shitty eggs.

“You’re fucked up,” Tom retorted quietly. He mumbled something in Harry’s ear, too low. It was impossible for Harry to hear it. Harry could imagine it. He had hoped for it.

Let’s be fucked up together.

Except, there was no ‘together’ anymore. Not the way they were. There was never a real ‘together’ to begin with. Harry had been charmed and flirted with. Teased and taunted. Harry had fallen in love with a man who couldn’t quite love him back. So, no, they couldn’t ever go back to that. Harry couldn’t be the doe-eyed trainee chasing after his teacher. He couldn’t be the whore that slept with an engaged man. He couldn’t be the slut that spread his legs for procedures. Harry couldn’t be a boy in love with a man too great for life, too confident in his own glory. No, Harry *wouldn’t* be that anymore.

Harry wouldn’t be that boy anymore. Harry was a man. Harry was a Healer. Harry was his equal. Harry would be this man’s equal in *all* ways. He was done with chasing someone that didn’t want or need to be caught.

All that Harry could hear was the thumping of Tom’s heart in his chest, a steady rhythm that Harry felt in the deepest part of him. He had missed that sound. It had gotten him through many nights.

Harry fell asleep to the war drum.

Chapter End Notes

First, I’m shocked that no one mentioned anything about Gellert Grindelwald dying on Dumbledore lol. No one gives a shit about Grindelwald. Which I get. I don't really lmao.

Second, I'm pleased to tell you that I have added a chapter count to this lovely story. It will be completed at chapter 31, and I have essentially outlined it to that point. I know exactly what happens each chapter. I'm so excited for you to experience what I've got for you!

Anyway, that was a cute chapter. But, I’m getting kinda tired of everything being cute and angsty. So, let’s make things...sexy again.

EDIT:

Withering Curse - http://spell-checkers-official.tumblr.com/post/90198196686/spell-name-withering-curse-incantation-sor

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry squirmed deeper into the familiar warmth, turning his face into hard muscle. Arms tightened around him. He let out a long sigh. He remembered those arms—those large, strong hands pressing him into the mattress. He remembered that body pressed against his back. He remembered being pounded into the *mattress*, screaming his voice hoarse, screaming *Tom, Tom, TOM—*

“Oh, fuck,” Harry gasped, waking up in a sudden rush.

“Good morning to you too.”

Tom's voice sounded low and gravelly. It was his tired voice, but it was also his ‘*I wanna fuck you until you cry’* voice. Harry groaned, turning his face back into Tom’s shoulder. He shuddered when he felt Tom’s hands drag down from where they were splayed against his stomach to his thighs, squeezing hard.

“Tom…” Harry whispered.

“I’m feeling much better,” Tom hissed into his ear, almost conversationally. His hands felt like hot brands on Harry’s thighs. He could feel the heat of them through his sleep pants. “You’re a very good Healer, Harry.”

“I gave you potions, you git,” Harry muttered. “Let me up.”

Tom’s hands tightened on his thighs, sliding inwards. Harry could feel the tips of Tom’s hands on the seams of his sleep pants, attempting to pry his thighs open. Harry gasped and then promptly swallowed that sound. He pressed his lips together.

“Harry...I still make you hot, don’t I?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he grabbed the sides of the tubs. “Stop being a selfish git and get dressed,” Harry snarled, and he pulled himself up, practically leaping out of the porcelain monstrosity. He turned to look at Tom, hands on his hips, and Merlin, did the man look ridiculous.

Tom Riddle was far too long for Harry's bathtub, his ridiculously long toes curling over the edge of the tub. He also looked far too smug for a man that was seemingly at death's door just the night before. His bare chest was always far too muscular for a man that was just a Healer. He *had* to work out, and when did he have time to do that when he was always eating poorly and never sleeping because he was working.

“How are you already healthy?” Harry hissed dangerously. “The Black Cat Flu takes three days of potions.”

“What can I say? My immune system is *extraordinary*," Tom drawled. He went on his knees in the bathtub and leered. Fuck, this man had seen Harry naked. He was definitely thinking about Harry naked, and Harry...Harry hadn't seen a naked man in a long time.

And Tom was probably the best-naked man he'd ever seen in his life. But, Harry had just promised himself that he wouldn't pant after the man like a bitch in heat anymore.

“Merlin, take a shower. You’re ridiculous,” Harry snapped.

Tom hummed. “Wouldn’t it save water if we showered together? You could wash my back and I’d...wash yours,” Tom said.

“Stop flirting with me,” Harry barked, clapping his hands to his face as he stumbled out of the bathroom, chased away by Tom’s snarky chuckles. Harry threw the door shut behind him, attempting not to imagine a wet, glistening Tom Riddle. He’d probably jerk off that thick, perfect—“Hermione!”

Harry stumbled out of his bedroom, running down the hall to his destination. He didn't give a second thought to the fact that Hermione's door was closed despite it being probably time for her to get up. He threw the door open, shouting Hermione's name again—his shout devolved into a shriek of horror as he saw a flash of pale skin.

“HARRY!” Hermione snarled, attempting to sit up, one of her long brown legs thrown over Ron’s shoulder as he thrust into her over and over again. Ron shuddered between her legs, coming to a stop, looking over his shoulder. He turned pale. So pale. And then, a bright, violent red.

Harry stood, shell-shocked, his jaw practically unhinged as he stared at the pale freckled arse of his friend who was balls-deep inside of his other friend.

"MY EYES!" he screamed, spinning into motion. He slapped his hands over his face and stumbled backward.

“GET OUT! GET OUT!”

Harry did just that. The door was thrown shut behind him and locked, magically. Harry swallowed, trying to forget what he’d just seen but the sight of Ron’s pale arse and Hermione’s leg thrown over Ron’s shoulder was burned into the back of his eyelids. Harry fell back against Hermione’s door and groaned.

Fucking *disgusting.*

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione watched Harry's back carefully, her chin resting on carefully folded fingers. Everything about this was careful. Too careful. Ron's ears were still pink from earlier that

morning. Neville was watching was a careful balance of amusement and nervousness. Tom hadn't seemed to notice anything amiss at all. The tension was as thick as a brick.

It was a familiar tension. The type of tension that had always characterized the breakfasts after Tom slept over. It was a familiar tension. Too familiar.

And everyone was far, far too careful.

“What’s for breakfast, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Eggs.”

Tom looked pleased. Harry slid the pile of too crunchy and, still, too runny eggs into the platter and slammed it on the table next to the toast. He slid into his seat next to Tom, and carefully watched Hermione as the others helped themselves. They had long gotten used to his shitty eggs.

“Interesting,” Hermione drawled. There was a long silence and she shook her head, leaning forward. “Why is he here?”

“Why does it matter?” Harry threw back. Almost violently, he stabbed his eggs and shoved them into his mouth. They didn’t taste as bad as usual. Harry took that as a mark of steady improvement.

“You had rules.”

“Rules that were followed,” Harry retorted.

Ron snorted. “We noticed. You were in the bathtub.”

“Harry—” Hermione warned.

“I just saw Ron *inside* of you. So, let's not throw stones at glass houses, yeah?" Harry said, good-natured but a hint of warning in his voice. He grimaced, shaking his head as he realized what he'd just said. "Merlin, I just saw Ron's pale freckled arse."

Tom sneered. “Disgusting.”

There was a long moment of tense silence with Hermione and Harry staring at one another, a challenge in both of their eyes. Finally, Hermione relented and leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Ron and I are dating,” Hermione said.

Harry looked surprised for a split-second before his lips curled into a shit-eating grin.

“Ooooh,” he cooed, teasingly. “So, I was *right.* You *do* want to kiss him and hug him. You want him to have your babies.”

Hermione snorted, rolling her eyes. Ron flushed.

"That's not really how that works, mate. You see, my penis is inside of—"

“Too much,” Neville grunted through a mouthful of eggs and toast. “Too. Too. Much.”

Tom was already scraping his plate clean, helping himself to another serving. Harry watched, his lips curling in amusement despite himself. Tom looked up from his plate, his fork halfway to his mouth. Lips pressed together, Tom snorted as he swallowed his laughter. Very deliberately, he continued to eat and Harry threw his head back, erupting with laughter. He ignored the bizarre looks his friends sent him.

“What’s so funny?” Ron demanded.

“Your flat, naked arse,” Harry snapped back.

Ron pouted. “My arse is *not* flat. *Your* arse is flat.”

“No, it’s not.”

Harry winced as he looked over at Tom. Tom looked surprised by the words that they had both spoken at the same time too. And then, he grinned, vicious and charming and flirtatious and Harry had to smother his laughter all over again.

Hermione shook her head. “You two are disgusting,” she muttered under her breath. “Have some decorum.”

“Learn how to use a lock,” Harry retorted.

“Learn how to *knock*," Hermione hissed as she stood, dumping her plate into the sink and storming out of the kitchen. Harry grinned at her, laughing to himself.

“She’s embarrassed,” Harry announced to the table.

“I walked in on them too, you know. In a broom closet. At work. I was traumatized,” Neville said conversationally. Harry’s eyes widened and he leaned forward.

“So, you knew? Did everyone know before me? Why didn’t she tell me the *moment* you two decided?” Harry demanded.

Ron shrugged. “We were...keeping it private. If it helps, we hadn’t told Neville. Like he said. He walked in on us.”

“Her bra was coming off. I’ve seen too much of Hermione than I’m comfortable with,” Neville said sharply

Tom rolled his eyes. “You’re all children.”

“Fuck off,” Harry said, good-naturedly.

Tom pulled his wand then and waved it. Harry watched in surprise as all of his notes came whizzing through the air, passing through the swinging kitchen door and settled next to

Tom's plate as he finished off his second helping of breakfast. It was quite honestly the neatest Summoning Spell Harry had ever seen and he was instantly struck with jealousy.

"In the throes of my illness—" Tom began.

"I thought you didn't get sick," Harry said mockingly.

Tom ignored him. "I had an idea," he said and then paused, glancing at Ron and Neville. "Get out."

"This is our kitchen!" Ron squawked.

"We're about to discuss a confidential case. You need to leave," Tom said shortly.

Neville whined, "Harry…"

"I mean...he's not wrong," Harry said sheepishly. Both Ron and Neville glared at him. "Ugh, don't pretend that breakfast was *good.* Look. I'll do the dishes and clean up. He won't stop being a prat until you move."

Ron glowered at Tom but stood up, clutching his last piece of toast as he stormed out of the kitchen. Neville followed, much quieter.

"*Muffliato*," Tom cast on the door. He followed up with a few choice locking spells and another privacy spell. He glanced over at Harry's unimpressed expression. "Your friends are known eavesdroppers."

Harry scoffed. "Whatever. Now, what's this brilliant plan you have?" Harry asked.

"All my plans are brilliant," Tom snapped.

"Tell that to the patients that died," Harry retorted, his voice grave.

Tom's eyes narrowed but he didn't respond cruelly. Instead, he said, "I had an idea…"

"Tom, you sound hesitant. You're making me think you're going to say something insane," Harry said, a smile playing on his lips already.

Tom didn't smile back.

"All strains of Vanishing Disease are different. This is known," Tom began.

Harry scoffed. "Well, yes, but she doesn't *have* Vanishing Disease. She's been hit with a Withering Curse."

"But, we have to treat it like it's a disease. Diseases are caused by bacteria. Viruses. We have to treat it for how it's acting," Tom said gravely.

"Okay?"

"Bacteria are alive, Harry," Tom said quietly. He was staring at his notes now and looked nearly appreciative of everything that Harry had written down. "They...you've disproved all of my other theories."

“Someone had to,” Harry said softly.

Tom hummed to himself. “Bacteria are alive. So, we have to kill it.”

“Treat it,” Harry said.

“No. Like you said. It’s a Withering Curse. We treat it as a Vanishing Disease. Which mean, it’s alive. But, it’s a curse. It adapts. It moves. Like a virus. So, no. We have to *kill* it.”

Harry’s eyes widened.

“You are *not* suggesting what I *think* you’re suggesting.”

“I can do it,” Tom drawled.

Harry’s lips curled back into a sneer. “How do you know how to do it? It goes against our very nature. We’re *Healers,* Tom. You can’t really be suggesting that we use...that...that *spell.* And you won't get it right on the first time."

“They’re very simple, Harry. The Unforgiveables,” Tom said quietly. “You have to *mean* it.”

“You’re mad,” Harry hissed. “The Department of Mysteries will never sanction it. *She* will never sanction it. You’re suggesting the fucking Killing Curse.”

Tom leaned back in his chair.

“I’m suggesting we curse a woman’s curse. I’m suggesting we kill something that isn’t alive but *is* alive, an absolute conundrum. And impossibility. No, I’m suggesting extreme measures.”

Madness.

DIAGNOSIS

Lily led the two men down the Potions & Poisonings Floor, practically walking backward. "This is where we keep patients for Potions & Poisonings. Offices are also on this floor. Largely, the potions labs can be found in the basement, closer to the pharmacy."

“And where are the greenhouses?” Zabini asked curiously.

Lily hummed. “We have a few greenhouses in the back courtyard, but we’re looking towards expansion.”

“In what way?”

Lily’s eyes narrowed. Zabini asked too many *fucking* questions.

"We're hoping to create a dark greenhouse in the basement as a more hospitable environment for plants such as fluxweed and Devil's Snare. With your generosity, we'll be able to achieve that sooner than later. This way," Lily snapped, turning on her heel as she led them towards the lift. She wouldn't tolerate any more questions. Lily pulled out her pocket watch and glanced at it—Lavender would be done with physical therapy soon.

“Healer Evans,” said a tall young blonde man with a rounded face. Longbottom, if Lily remembered correctly. He was one of Harry’s friend.

“Hello, Longbottom,” she said carefully and nearly beamed when he swooned at his name coming out of her mouth. Good. She got that one right then.

“Do you know most Healers here?” Diggory asked.

“Only the ones that matter,” Lily allowed.

Then, she condemned her words. She was supposed to be projecting *warmth.* She entered the lift and the two men followed after her. There was just barely room in the lift, full of matrons, a pair of Mind Healers that would be going to the top floor, and Draco.

“*Bonjour*,” Lily said, softly.

“*Bonjour, Guėrriseur*. Oh. Blaise,” Draco said, looking pleasantly surprised by Zabini. Lily raised an eyebrow.

“Do you know one another?” Lily asked.

“Yes. Our mothers are old friends,” Zabini said. He beamed at Draco, reaching forward to clap Lily’s student on the shoulder. “How are you, old friend?”

“Well. I am working in the Mind Healing Ward now,” Draco said, his voice stilted.

Lily’s eyes widened. That was news to her.

“A noble profession,” Zabini said with a smile. “Have you spoken with Theo, lately?”

Lily’s eyes narrowed. Theo. Harry had known a Theo, hadn’t he?

“No. I have not. We should get drinks soon. Astoria is here too,” Draco said. He looked over at Lily, a strange look in his eyes. “It was good to see you, *Guérriseur.*”

Lily nodded. The lift doors opened and she slowly turned away from her student.

“And finally, the Spell Damage floor,” Lily said as she backed out of the lift. She had long dropped her smile—it had become too hard to maintain. Diggory looked put off by her

sudden coldness, but Zabini seemed like he appreciated it. Good. Lily wouldn't be smiling again any time soon. Except, then, she was smiling. "And there he is now. My son."

Harry was looking up at Riddle, his brow furrowed.

"—don't even know how to use the Killing—"

"*I* do," Riddle retorted.

Harry snorted. "Tom, you're being stupid. You're so—Mum!"

"Harry, my love," Lily said, her voice warming as she walked up to him. She leaned down, pressing a kiss to his temple. Harry looked surprised but he leaned into, smiling gently. Lily pulled back. Her eyes narrowed on Riddle. "Riddle."

"Evans," Riddle sneered back.

There was a long moment of silence before Lily gathered her wits.

"This is Healer Tom Marvolo Riddle, Head of Spell Damage, and my son, Harry Potter, his student," Lily said, unable to keep the smug pride out of her voice. Harry's cheeks turned pink but he held up his tiny smile. "These are the two newest members of the Board: Amos Diggory and Blaise Zabini."

Zabini was staring at Harry, a hungry look in his eyes. "Enchanted."

Harry raised an eyebrow, looking him up and down, and that smile of his turned into something far more wicked. Riddle's lips curled into a sneer and he took a step forward, holding out his hand to Zabini. Zabini didn't hesitate to take it, pumping it once, though his eyes remained on Harry.

"Healer Riddle, I've been meaning to speak with you," Diggory began, his chest pumping up.

Riddle raised an eyebrow. "About what, exactly? I'm afraid we're very busy with my current trial—"

"It's about your trial!" Diggory blurted out. "My son—handsome chap, just turned 24—has elected to join your trial. He's filled out the application and has had a copy sent out to the Department of Mysteries as well as you. We want to know when we can expect treatment."

Lily winced. That wasn't going to go well.

Riddle looked unimpressed.

"I haven't had the chance to look at any incoming applications as of yet. And forgive me, but you said your son is...24," Riddle said.

"Yes," Diggory said, nodding like a bobblehead.

Riddle already looked finished with the conversation. “Then, this isn’t something we should be discussing. If you’ll excuse us—”

“You are far too lovely to be a Healer. You must be incredibly talented,” Zabini said to Harry.

Harry laughed quietly. “I didn’t know being lovely and talented were mutually exclusive.”

“Well, you prove that theory quite wrong, don’t you?” Zabini retorted.

Riddle rolled his eyes. “Enough. Harry—”

“I am a member of the Board. I have a right to know about projects that my money is being invested in—” Diggory began, puffing his chest up.

“Forgive me, Mr. Diggory, but you weren’t a part of the Board when the Gorsemoor Grant was awarded to me. Now, that is quite enough. Harry, let’s go,” Riddle said coldly. He stalked past Harry and Zabini. Lily raised an eyebrow at her only son, and he winked at her—so he was well-aware of the reaction that his actions caused. How very calculated of him.

“I hope we will speak again soon,” Zabini said, his Italian voice thickening.

Loftily, Harry lifted his chin. “I suppose. It depends on whether I decide that you’re worth speaking to again. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do,” Harry drawled. He nodded at Diggory and wiggled his fingers in farewell at Lily as he followed after his teacher.

Zabini couldn’t look away.

DIAGNOSIS

“This is my favorite plant.”

Neville jumped at the voice, spinning around in the soil to see Astoria Greengrass, kneeling in the dirt. She didn’t seem to care about the fact that her robes were tracking compost or the fact that she was getting dirt under her pristine nails. That might have been something Malfoy cared about, but Astoria didn’t even seem to notice.

“What’s your favorite plant?” Neville asked, uncomfortable.

Astoria didn’t look up from the bulbous plant that she was kneeling in front of. “The mimbulus mimbletonia,” she said as she absently reached out.

“Don’t touch—”

Very deliberately, Astoria ran her finger over one of the bulbous boil-like spines, gently. The mimbulus mimbletonia shuddered, making an odd crooning sound. Neville looked at her, impressed and surprised and he slowly settled.

“It has a purpose. It serves a purpose and it helps people. Stinksap can be used to Heal injured animals. I thought I would be a...what is it? An animal Healer?” Astoria asked, her brow furrowed.

Neville’s lips curled into a smile despite himself. “A veterinarian?”

“This is a strange word. ‘Vet-er-in-ar-ian’,” she said, drawing out the word slowly. She grinned at him, suddenly, that terrifying weird grin. “I am hiding from Luna and Hannah. And Draco.”

“Why?” Neville asked curiously.

“Draco is needy. And he doesn’t understand why I like what I do. Hannah doesn’t understand. She doubts me. Because I am cold. Luna tries to understand. I think she is the closest to doing so,” Astoria said, and she finally stood up, going towards the more tame flowers. She beamed as she petted the velvet petals of a lily, and for the first time, Neville wasn’t completely freaked out by her smile. It filled him with warmth—the same sort warmth that Neville felt when Ron clapped him on the shoulder and said ‘well done’ or when Hermione nudged the takeaway menus towards him even on her nights if he’d had a rough day.

“Why do you what you do?” Neville asked.

Astoria's eyes narrowed but her odd smile never faltered. "You are the first to ask me besides Dumbly-dore. Dumbledore. I am sorry. His name is difficult."

Neville snorted out a laugh. “I guess.”

Astoria was silent for a long time and then, she looked up.

“If you want to work in the Children’s Ward, you can’t get emotional,” Astoria began.

Neville looked up at her, surprised.

“Isn’t that part of the job? Caring? Hannah cares a lot,” Neville said.

"And that makes her good. But, she gets emotional. There is a difference between advocating for tiny humans and berating terrified parents—she hasn't learned that. We have got great hands. Great instincts. These are tiny humans who hope and makes wishes and that makes them more resilient than adults. They believe. In the Children's Ward, we have miracles and anything is possible," Astoria said, her eyes wide. "Do you understand?"

Neville let out a surprised laugh. “Yeah. That’s hardcore.”

“Hard...core?” Astoria asked and then she shook her head. “Yes, hardcore!”

DIAGNOSIS

Severus leaned back in his chair, sinking into the overstuffed seat, as he attempted to eat his salad. Albus didn't seem too worried by Severus' increasing discomfort as he dug at the very bottom of his bag of lemon drops. Albus leaned back in his seat, pouting as he popped his very last lemon drop into his mouth.

“How is young Healer Malfoy fairing?” Severus asked.

“Well. He has taken to the subtlety of the Mind Arts like a kelpie to water,” Albus said pleasantly. He leaned forward, staring at Severus curiously. “He is a gifted Legilimens and Occlumens. Did you know?”

“Why would I?” Severus asked coldly.

Albus’ eyes shuttered for a moment before he resumed his genial smile. There was a long moment of silence between the pair of them. Then, Albus leaned forward. “I suppose you’d like to know about Healer Greengrass’ progress as well?”

Severus hadn’t remembered the strange girl.

“Yes,” he said through his teeth. “I thought it strange when she opted for the Children’s Ward. She seemed better suited to Mind Healing than Mr. Malfoy. She wouldn’t get attached.”

Albus hummed.

“I think you don’t know her quite as well as you believe, my boy,” Albus said, side-stepping Severus’ words carefully. “Luna says that she is a delightful addition to the Children’s War. A few of the long-term patients have taken quite a shine to her. I am not surprised. Healer Greengrass calls them tiny humans.”

Albus’ lips curled into a smile. Severus’ lips curled into a sneer.

“This is a gifted class of Healers,” Severus admitted grudgingly.

Albus’ smile seemed more genuine. “It is. Gifted in the way that very few are. Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Padma Patil, Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter.”

Severus couldn’t help the utter distaste that spread across his face.

“Harry Potter,” he repeated softly.

Albus gave a boyish grin. “Come now, Severus. We cannot pretend that the boy is not gifted. He was gifted enough to grab Tom’s attention.”

“I don’t think it was his ‘gift’ at Healing that caught Riddle’s attention,” Severus retorted.

Albus frowned then. It always startled Severus how quickly Albus' emotions could shift. It made Severus question whether Albus was feeling so many different things at once that he

could present the emotion in a split-second or if he felt nothing at all and only pretended. He was strange like Lily, in that way.

“Do not be disparaging, Severus.”

"He is rewarded for sleeping with a superior. He does not follow the rules. He rides the coattails of his mother. He is *arrogant,*” Severus said, full of venom and spite. He ignored the disappointment on Albus’ face, pushing on to say, “There is quite a bit of young talent. I hesitate to count him as part of it.”

“You are blinded by your own prejudices,” Albus said.

“Perhaps,” Severus allowed. He waved his wand, Vanishing his empty plate and folded his hands in his lap. “It seems that you are bringing Draco up as a successor of sorts. Have you thought further on retirement?”

Albus hummed, carefully not making eye contact. “Perhaps,” he returned.

"And my standing. Do I still stand first in line to become Head Healer?" Severus asked. He pushed on. "I have done as you've asked of me. I have taken on students of my own, and continue to mentor Longbottom. I am looking to pursue one of my own projects in the future. Of course, I do not have a grant the size of the Gorsemoor Grant at my disposal, but there are excess funds in the Plants & Poisonings department."

Albus looked interested. “A project, you say? Do explain.”

“It is an improvement on the Wolfsbane Potion. Lily told me that though her child wasn’t bitten, she has found some adverse effects of her attack. A heightened appetite for bloody meat, aggressive behaviors during the full moon, and a penchant for sleepwalking,” Severus said carefully. Albus raised an eyebrow. “After further research, this is typical behavior for true werewolves during the new moon. I would like to improve the potion to subdue all of these behaviors.”

Albus hummed. “So, Lily put you up to this.”

“No,” Severus snarled. Albus didn’t look like he believed him. “I have done all that you’ve asked. I have put in the work and paid my dues. Would you pass me over for what is *mine*?”

Albus’ eyes grew cold and furious.

“It is not *yours,* Severus Snape. Until I have decided, *I* am Head Healer.”

“This is about Riddle, isn’t it?” Severus accused. “Just as Potter, you would reward him for poor behavior. I am older, more seasoned, and trained. I am willing to build a rapport with the Board and further involve myself in the education of trainees. But, you cannot give this to Riddle. You have always favored Riddle even after what he did to *you*—”

“That is not your concern,” Albus said, silencing Severus almost immediately. Slowly, Albus stood to his feet and Severus was reminded of how tall the older man was. “Tom Riddle has been teaching—not because he wants the position of Head Healer. He teaches because he is

good at it and it’s his job. He doesn’t need to be asked. He is pursuing ways to improve and revolutionize Healing—not to placate an unrequited love. You would do well to recognize that Healer Riddle is talented and just as qualified for the position, and you do not ‘get’ it because you think it is what you *deserve*. Now. Get out.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Ron,” said Emmeline.

Her voice was soft. She sounded surprised by his presence. Ron’s lips curled into a small smile. He hadn’t quite realized how much he had missed her. Emmeline took an aborted step towards him and then pulled back.

“Hey, Em,” he said.

Emmeline lifted her chin. “Can I help you?”

Ron winced.

“I...yeah. We can talk?” Ron asked, rubbing the back of his neck. Emmeline watched him for a long moment before she nodded, slowly opening the door to her study. She waited for him to walk through before closing the door behind them. Ron took in the state of the room. “Wow. You’ve got a lot happening in here.”

It was a mess, in short. In length, there were piles and piles of books on the floor, cluttered around a strange winding pathway that diverged to the couch and to Emmeline’s desk. Large pieces of parchment were stuck to the wall, both Emmeline and Hermione’s handwriting cluttered on every inch of the paper. Finally, at the centerpiece of it all was a rather pristine roll of parchment on the desk, untouched but by Emmeline’s hand.

“We’re doing the finishing touches on our paper,” Emmeline said carefully. “This is the third draft.”

Ron hummed. “Impressive.”

He walked along the path, peering at the phrases that shot out at him: ‘hair is most effective when fresh', ‘pervasiveness of Dark—', ‘methodology'. He pulled away and looked over at Emmeline. She looked exhausted, more so than Hermione, and it was the first time that Ron recognized Emmeline as someone that was older than him. She was at least half a decade older than him. He wasn't sure why that hadn't hit him before. After all, she was Head of Magical Creature-Induced Injuries. Of course, that was a rather new title, but she was an accomplished Healer. She'd been shortlisted for the Gorsemoor Grant once before.

Emmeline had lived. Emmeline was gorgeous and she had wanted *him*. Tall, skinny, freckled youngest-of-the-Weasley-brothers ‘Ron’. He knew if Fred or George knew they’d want to

know how he was getting all of these gorgeous women to want him.

“Your sparkling wit,” Emmeline drawled.

“What?” Ron squawked.

Emmeline rolled her eyes. “You’re thinking out loud, Ron,” she muttered. She sighed, leaning back into her desk. “What do you want, Ron? Your girlfriend, *clearly,* isn’t here.”

“I—” Ron stammered. “She’s...yeah, she’s my girlfriend. How did you know?”

“I may not be an Auror, but I’m not an idiot, Ron,” Emmeline scoffed. “You two are besotted with one another.”

Ron cringed. “Are you angry? Are you going to hex me?”

“I’m not a *child,* Ron,” Emmeline said snippily. “I’m...I’m hurt. The guy I liked doesn’t return my feelings. So, yes, I’m hurt, but I’m not going to resort to *violence.* Grow the hell up. You’re not *that* awesome.”

Ron held up his hands.

“You’re right,” he acknowledged quickly. “I’m sorry.”

Emmeline deflated. “Ugh, this fucking *sucks,* Ron. I know that I shouldn’t treat you as a prize. I know that, logically, but I can’t help but think I did *everything* right. And she didn’t. She’s literally insane, Ron. Like, actually. But, you picked her, and not me, and I just have to get over that, but I *work* with her and I *see* how insane she is, and it *sucks,* because I’m starting to like her.”

Ron snorted.

“Yeah. She’s like that. She’s...she’s Hermione,” Ron said, and he smiled thinking about the way her hair smelled like coconut oil, and how passionate she got when she ranted.

“And it sucks. Because we were friends, and I miss my friend,” Emmeline confessed.

Ron took a step forward, nodding. “I miss my friend too. No one will go to shitty bars with me or drink cheap whiskey. No one laughs at my jokes. I told Hermione the joke about the hag, the Healer, and the mimbulus mimbletonia and she just said she didn’t get it!”

Emmeline snorted.

“I’m not going to laugh at your jokes anymore. You’re not funny.”

“What? I totally am!” Ron debated.

Emmeline shook her head. “No, you’re not. Ron, don’t you know *anything* about girls? Girls laugh at the guy they like even if he tells the *worst* jokes,” Emmeline sighed, shaking her

head. She looked up, her smile dying. “No one eats greasy fish and chips with me. You were one of my best friends.”

“And you’re mine.”

“Are?” Emmeline asked.

Ron nodded. “That didn’t change, you know.”

“How was I supposed to know? You left me at my flat after *yelling* at me, and ran away to Hermione Granger,” Emmeline snapped.

Ron shook his head. “No. I went home. And she *stalked me* across England to find me. Because she didn’t know where I was and she was terrified,” Ron said softly.

Emmeline’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I didn’t go home. And she found me. She’s my family. And she’s crazy and a hag and a bossy know-it-all and *obsessed* with being the best, and I like her anyway. I like her a lot. And Neville doesn’t want to hear about it anymore,” Ron said, trailing off. “You probably don’t want to hear it either.”

He made to go towards the door. Just when his hand wrapped around the doorknob, he heard Emmeline say, "She's something."

Ron grinned and looked over his shoulder. “She is.”

Emmeline bit her bottom lip. “Let’s go to the pub on Friday.”

Ron’s grin widened. “You pick. The grimiest, dirtiest pub you can think of.”

DIAGNOSIS

“The Killing Curse. So, we’re really going with that,” Harry muttered under his breath. He looked over at Tom, his lips pursed. “We’re *really* going with that?”

“We’re really going with that,” Tom repeated. He looked quite stern. The only other people in the theatre was Mafalda Hopkirk, lying on the table—sans all hair and most of the muscle mass of her arms and legs—and Miriam Strout. “You really need to sign that contract, Matron Strout.”

“You really need to Summon to do that, Healer Riddle,” Miriam said, just as stern. Tom’s lips twitched in amusement and he said nothing else as he approached Mafalda’s very still body.

“How are you even targeting the bacteria, Tom?” Harry demanded.

“This isn’t exactly the well thought out plan, Harry. I never said it was,” Tom muttered under his breath. Before Harry could open his mouth to complain again, he continued, “It’s what’s necessary, however.”

"Can't you reverse it? Instead of Vanishing, you Conjure," Harry snapped.

“I can’t just Conjure her *muscles* back, Harry,” Tom retorted. “First: that’s *stupid*. Second: I can’t just Conjure back something that *I* didn’t Vanish. I don’t know where it was Vanished *to*.”

"That's not how Vanishing Spells work, Tom," Harry snarled. "You can Conjure something back. That's why we Vanish living things at Hogwarts and then our professors can Conjure them back!"

“Don’t shout magical theory at *me*,” Tom retorted. “Do you know how complex a single muscle is, let alone all of her muscles from her arms and legs? Do you know how *intimately* I would need to understand her tissue? The curse is in her fucking spine now. I can't Summon her spine back, Harry! So, if we're going to cast the Killing Curse on this woman's spine, rendering her disabled but alive, I'm going to do it. Now."

It suddenly struck Harry that they were screaming at each back and forth over a woman that was, for all intents and purposes, about to be murdered.

"Wait. Are you casting the Killing Curse? But only on her spine? Really, Healer Riddle? How does that work?" Miriam asked in disbelief.

“Right?” Harry squawked. “He’s insane! I can’t believe—”

“QUIET!” Tom roared and Harry fell silent, eyes wide. Tom pinched the bridge of his nose, looking between the two of them. “She asked for extreme measures. I am *performing* extreme measures. And I know...I know it won’t work. I know.”

“Then, *why*, Tom?” Harry demanded.

Tom took a deep breath. "Because we have done all we can. And now, it's our job to make sure she's comfortable. She is in an immense amount of pain, Harry. Just like Katie Bell was in. Do you want her to die in pain? Or in an instant of bliss?"

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again.

“And if it works, you’ve found a way to make the Killing Curse do something good,” Harry whispered softly. Tom looked back at him with a heavy frown.

“It won’t work.”

“But, it could. If anyone could do it. You could,” Harry said softly.

Tom frowned down at Mafalda. “You have far too much faith in my abilities.”

“You usually do too,” Harry challenged. “You wanted to conquer death. Conquer death with death.”

“It’s not going to work.”

Harry resisted saying the words he wanted to. *I know.*

“Okay,” Harry said instead. “You really think you can do it on your first go?”

Tom looked at him for a long moment. Slowly, he pulled his long, pale wand. “Matron Strout. Healer Potter. Please turn Ms. Hopkirk onto her front.”

Harry swallowed and nodded. He turned to Miriam and they both lifted their wands, slowly Levitating Mafalda Hopkirk and turning her onto her stomach. Harry pulled his wand down, slowly slicing open her hospital ropes to reveal her back. He winced where he saw her back caving in at different intervals, different vertebrae that had Vanished from her.

“Tom?” Harry asked softly. “It...it takes a few times...my father had to use it once and he couldn’t—”

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Harry gasped as he saw the flash of green light. It momentarily blinded him and he nearly fell back as suddenly Mafalda Hopkirk fell to the table, a dead weight. Her corpse had fallen, like her puppet strings had been sliced. Harry looked over at Tom, trembling. Tom stared at the body and then looked up at Harry. He didn’t say anything.

“I…she’s dead,” Harry whispered.

“We have to tell the family,” Tom said. And then, he really looked at Harry. “I’ll tell the family. Go home, sweetheart.”

Harry turned on his heel, fleeing the theatre. Matron Strout was still stiff as a board. Slowly, she looked at Tom.

“Healer?” Matron Strout asked.

“It’s not the first time I used it,” Tom said quietly.

“Healer Riddle—” Matron Strout warned.

"It does take a few times," Tom continued as if he hadn't heard her. "He was in a lot of pain. Too much pain. I couldn't save him."

“There is no shame in giving someone’s death a little bit of dignity,” Matron Strout said after a long moment.

Tom frowned. “I know.”

Still, Miriam wondered if he did.

DIAGNOSIS

Bellatrix hated herself. She looked so fucking *stupid*, hovering in front of Tom's office. Everyone was watching her while they walked past. A pair of matrons had looked at her, eyes wide as dinner plates until they walked past her, and immediately erupted into giggles. She wondered why people were still talking about her and Tom and Harry fucking Potter. Didn't anyone have anything better to talk about than their sordid affairs?

Bellatrix tugged nervously on the ends of her hair and she straightened when she saw Tom exiting the lift. He looked exhausted in a way that she'd never quite seen him. Tom liked to pretend that he was invincible, and yet now, he only looked defeated. As he approached her, he didn't put on his mask.

Bellatrix felt a thrill rush through her. She was allowed to see this.

Tom's face twisted with annoyance.

"What do you *want*?" he hissed. "I don't have *time* for you, Bellatrix."

"I wanted to know...well...I missed you," Bellatrix blurted out.

There was a long moment of silence. Bellatrix didn't take back her words. Tom stared at her as if she were an idiot.

"I *really* don't have time for you," he said, his voice flat. He pushed past her, nearly shoving her as he stalked into his office. He swung the door shut behind her, but Bellatrix caught it with the very pointed toe of her boot.

She slid inside, leaning back against the door as she watched him pack up for the night. Agitated, he threw a few case files into his satchel, stowing it away with a few scrolls. He gathered two crystal wells of ink that Bellatrix recognized. Rodolphus had bought them for Tom's birthday a few years ago. She wondered why he hadn't thrown them out. Slowly, she realized that Tom had caught her staring—not that she was trying to hide it. Very deliberately, he pressed the wells into his bag with a few quills.

Bellatrix opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. Tom was still watching her. He was hesitating. And then, the irritation and annoyance fell away from his face, and his burgundy eyes burned.

"Why did you cheat on me?"

That wasn't the question that she had anticipated.

"What?" she whispered.

"Why did you cheat on me?"

“You know why…”

"Why did you cheat on me?" he roared at her.

“DON’T PRETEND YOU CARE! WHY DO YOU CARE?” she roared back, her own piercing shriek making her wince.

Tom hadn’t flinched. He lifted his chin and stalked past her, nearly shoving her again in his rush to get out of the door. He stopped in the doorway.

“You were my best friend. You were my best friends and you betrayed me,” he said, his voice low. “I always *cared*.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, y’all. Here’s another chapter for you. I hope you enjoyed it. It’s a little short, but that’s because it’s kinda a transition chapter. I’m really starting to lay the foundation for the climax and tying up all the loose plot holes. This means that relationships are now determined. I know where they’re going and you won’t be able to change my mind.

OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, QUEEN CARDI B RECENTLY DROPPED AN ALBUM. IT IS AN ALBUM OF BANGER AFTER BANGER. THERE WERE NO SKIPS. MY QWEEN.

Finally, I won’t be updating again until late-May (but don't hold me to that. Never say never). My semester is winding down, and I’ll be studying super hard for my finals and finishing up a few research papers. See you again soon!

EDIT:

Withering Curse (Refer to last chapter for links)

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Have you ever owned dress robes?” Hermione asked curiously as they lounged on the bed. She burrowed deeper into Ron’s side, her head tucked right against his shoulder, practically under his arm. Ron shifted, uncomfortable, but she threw a leg over his middle, trapping him there.

She was comfortable. That was all that mattered.

“I mean...yes. Pureblood wizarding family,” Ron allowed slowly. “But, they were ugly. *So* ugly.”

Hermione lifted her head, delighted. “Can I look forward to seeing you in them at this fundraiser?”

“Why are you like this?” Ron groaned, letting his head fall back into the pillow. He gave up on trying to free his body from Hermione’s clutches, electing to wrap his arm around her and shift her halfway onto his body. “No. I’m going to Madame Malkin’s for a fitting of new robes.”

“New robes? You’re going to buy new ones?” Hermione said with a frown. “I was going to buy second-hand robes.”

“For your first set?” Ron asked curiously.

“Why not?” Hermione said lazily.

Ron hummed. "You should spend some of that hard-earned money on a nice set of robes for yourself rather than takeaway."

Hermione stiffened and she pulled away to look at him fully in the face. “Oh, really? Which one of us it, that puts most of her paycheck in the bank every two weeks? And which one of us buys a brand new chess set even though no one here is equipped to beat them?”

Ron snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Is it my fault that you’re all mediocre at chess?” Ron quipped. Hermione opened her mouth to retort but he silenced her with a quick kiss, running his fingers over her cheek. Hermione fell into it for a moment before pulling back, eyes narrowed. Ron hummed. “I’m not trying to silence you with kissing. Merlin.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Hermione said stiffly.

Ron grinned. That was *totally* what she was going to say.

“I think you’d look nice in blue, by the way,” Ron said softly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “What kind of blue? Navy, periwinkle, cerulean, powder blue, ice blue—”

“You talk so much,” Ron snorted, falling onto his back.

Hermione reared back, ready to snap again. Ron braced himself for it, a wicked smile already spreading across his face. It only made Hermione straighten even more, her rant building. Her incoming rant was interrupted by a soft squeaking sound. Ron paused, staring at her wide-eyed. Suddenly, Hermione froze, her breath stopping in her lungs.

“Did you just…” Ron trailed off, eyes wide in wonder.

“No,” Hermione said, her voice as cold as the tundra. Even still, she felt heat burn in her cheeks.

A choked sound of laughter emerged from Ron’s throat.

“You just *farted*,” Ron laughed.

Hermione slid under the covers, shrieking, “Shut up!”

"I think it's worse under there." Ron cackled loud, haunting sounds, and Hermione slipped from the bed, stumbling out the bed and crashing into the bedside table. Ron's laughter grew even louder, chasing Hermione right out of the bedroom.

Hermione slammed the door behind her and buried her face in her hands, letting out a shout of frustration.

How fucking *mortifying.*

DIAGNOSIS

“What was all that screaming about this morning?” Harry asked as he walked down the hall towards the trainee room, arm in arm with Hermione. Hermione hummed.

“What screaming?” she asked absently.

“Ron was laughing. You were screaming. I heard a door slam. Are you two fighting?” Harry asked curiously. As if Ron had heard from in front of them, he glanced over his shoulder and grinned. Hermione scoffed, looking away. “Okay…so not fighting. Is this a weird sex thing?”

“Ugh, *no*,” Hermione snapped. “Don’t ask questions.”

“Why not? You’re my *person*,” Harry drawled, teasing her with a poke in her cheek.

"Ew. Do you go around telling people that? Do they think we're soft?" Hermione demanded.

“No. They still think we’re stone cold bitches,” Harry said cheerfully.

Hermione smirked as they entered the trainee room. “Perfect.”

“What’s perfect?” Neville called over his shoulder.

“That the masses think that we’re bitches,” Harry laughed. He pulled away from Hermione with a quick hip check, making his way to his cupboard.

“Is it perfect?” Neville asked, his voice going high. “Is it really?”

Before Harry could respond, they were interrupted by a loud, obnoxious sneeze.

“What is *that*?" Hermione asked, her lips curled in distaste. She rubbed her nose, sniffling as she tried to avoid sneezing again. She very carefully turned towards Harry, avoiding looking at Ron at all costs.

Harry peered into his cupboard, his brow furrowed. “Flowers. What kind of flowers are these, Neville?” Harry asked.

Neville frowned from where he was. He walked over, buttoning up his robes. “Just because I’m a Herbologist doesn’t mean I know—oh, morning glories and orange roses. You have an admirer, Harry?”

"What do they mean?" Harry asked, frowning. He pulled out the bouquet of flowers, holding it out in front of him like they were poisonous nettles. They were clashing quite a bit though the orange was muted, nearly coral, if Harry honest. He supposed that whoever had given it to him cared much for the romanticism of symbolism than aesthetics.

“The orange-coral roses mean desire and enthusiasm. Morning glories typically symbolize affection. Is there a card?” Neville asked curiously.

Harry went back into his locker, sneering as he brushed away some of the fallen petals. His entire cupboard smelled like a flower shop. While some complained about the sterile smell of St. Mungo’s that seeped into their work robes, Harry found it quite soothing. He pulled out his robes and began to get dressed, briskly ignoring the flowers. Neville snuck up behind him, plucking out the card that Harry had very pointedly ignored.

“‘*My affections to you*’. Blaise Zabini. Who’s Blaise Zabini?” Neville asked loudly.

Draco squawked by his cupboard, spinning to glower at the pair. “What about *Blaise?* He sent *you* flowers?”

“Why, Malfoy? Jealous?” Harry jeered.

Draco scoffed, shaking his head. “*Non, je pense qu’il...*could do better,” Draco said mockingly.

Harry flipped him the bird and sighed as he looked at the bouquet of flowers. Hermione sneezed again, obnoxiously, and she glowered at the flower, rubbing her nose roughly.

“Who’s Blaise Zabini?” Ron asked again.

Harry sighed as he buttoned his robes up. “One of the new Board members.”

“What is it about you that draws men of power?” Hannah asked curiously, popping up from Merlin only knows where.

“His raw animal magnetism,” Ron teased. He grinned over at Hermione, but she was primly acting as if she couldn’t see him. It only made Ron cackle louder. Harry cast them both a strange look.

“I’m cute and I fuck like a champ,” Harry said instead. He paused. “Also, I think he may have heard of me from my ex-boyfriend.”

“Your ex-boyfriend?” Draco asked. He crept forward, staring at the bouquet of flowers in distaste. Astoria called out something in French that may have been a warning, but Draco ignored her as he sauntered over. “Wait...*you* dated Theo?”

“How do you know Theo?” Harry demanded.

"I know everyone," Draco said, imperiously. Harry rolled his eyesas withand Draco sneered even harder. "I must speak with my friends about the danger of pretty faces with no substance."

Harry pulled his wand. “One more word, and I’ll have you on your back.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Isn’t that...*your* favorite way to pass the time?”

“*Langlock.*”

Draco jerked as his tongue suddenly flew up to the roof of his mouth, locking shut. Harry's eyes widened as he looked over his shoulder at Hermione. Hermione's eyes burned as she stalked forward, her wand still held aloft. She pressed it to the underside of Draco's chin.

"No slut-shaming," she warned softly.

Astoria finally decided that it was time to intervene, dancing over and grabbing Draco by the elbow. She looked over at all of them.

"I am sorry. Draco is stupid," she said as if that explained everything.

Harry found that it did.

“Maybe he should be the one who apologizes,” Hermione said sharply.

Astoria nodded her concession. "Yes," she agreed. She jerked Draco behind her and looked over at Neville, a gentle look in her eyes. "I am sorry that my friend is being mean. We are still friends?"

Neville snorted. “I’m not going to hold you responsible for Malfoy’s stupidity.”

Astoria beamed that oddly terrifying smile as she dragged Draco away, admonishing him in harsh French. Hannah looked at Astoria suspiciously and descended upon her, probably to demand to know why she was friends with Neville. Ron looked at Neville with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re friends with *her*?”

“Um...she’s friends with me,” Neville corrected.

Ron snorted, shaking his head to himself before he turned to look at Harry, an intrigued gleam in his eye. Harry frowned at him.

“You should give Zabini a chance, I think,” Ron declared. “What do you think Neville?”

Neville’s eyes widened. Hermione paused from where she was resolutely ignoring him.

“Uh...well...I suppose,” Neville allowed cautiously.

Harry frowned.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

Ron stepped forward, grabbing him by the shoulder and squeezing. "You're waiting. I know you say that you're not, but you are. Don't you think you deserve better than to wait for a man that might never be ready?"

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione shifted nervously as she flipped through the magizoology journal, sipping gently at her tea. Emmeline didn’t seem to notice her nervous energy, calmly drinking her tea as she flipped through her own copy of Creature Quarterly. Apparently, their former patient, the Scamander fellow, was quite famous. He was splashed right over the inside cover, appearing quite dashing with an Augurey perched on his shoulder.

“I’ve been meaning to finish my paper on Spectres. Do you think they’d take it?” Emmeline asked suddenly.

Hermione nearly spilled her tea all over her lap. “I...about Ms. Bath?”

“Yes. Spectres are tricky creatures. There isn’t much research done about them. If I had won the Gorsemoor, I would’ve used the grant to track more down. Collect more data. Both qualitative and quantitative. Now, I have one Spectre,” Emmeline said with a wistful sigh. “A lovely Spectre, of course. But, only one.”

“A case study, then,” Hermione suggested as calmly as she could. She took a gulp of her tea to settle her nerves, but only succeeded in burning her tongue. “Ah. Thuck.”

“What?” Emmeline asked with a raised eyebrow.

Hermione swallowed. “I said…‘fuck’. I burned my tongue,” Hermione said sheepishly.

Emmeline looked thoroughly unimpressed, but she turned her gaze back to the magazine, slowly turning the page as she hummed to herself. “A reliable case study has about two to three cases to compare.”

“A profile?” Hermione suggested weakly, fighting to be useful in some way after looking like a jackass. Emmeline paused, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Interesting. I don’t think a profile has ever been done on a Spectre. Hermione, will you look that up for me later? The library has back issues from 1942, but anything before 1987 will be hogwash if it has to do with beings,” Emmeline said under her breath. She looked over at Hermione.

Hermione frowned. “Beings?”

"Any creature with sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws," Emmeline said as if reciting from a very boring book. She hummed, shaking out her perfect glossy curls, and sure, Hermione had very nice curls of her own—curls that always smelled of coconut oil and jojoba—but *Emmeline* had probably never farted in a man’s bed, and certainly not basically *on* the man she loved.

Hermione blanched. *The man she loved*. Well, what a *terrifying* thought.

“Anything before then will be blatantly prejudiced, won’t it?” Hermione asked, unimpressed.

Emmeline hummed. “Righto. Utter trash, written by old pureblood men,” Emmeline said with a slight sneer. “You know until Lily Evans, we would’ve been relegated to matrons. Sure, McGonagall is around, but she came in with Dumbledore, and she’s Minerva *McGonagall*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hermione asked curiously.

Emmeline looked at her in surprise. “You don’t know?” she asked. Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “Right...I mean McGonagall is...an *icon.* She was going to be a Transfiguration Mistress because she's...utterly insane at it. Just absolutely wicked. Everyone was vying for her. They thought she was a once in a...in a forever type of phenomenon. And then, Lily

Evans came and *she* was a once in a forever type of phenomenon, and I think that made the old men—the Board—realize that women can do this job."

Hermione leaned forward, her body buzzing with ambition.

"I idolized Lily Evans. When we were taking the basic Healing courses, it was a lot of theoretical work. Half our syllabus was her work, and I just...she's extraordinary," Hermione said, her voice fading away. It wasn't hard for her to compartmentalize the woman. Lily was a bit of a bitch, and an absent mum, but that didn't take away from the fact that she was literally the greatest Healer of her generation.

"Yeah. Weird. And stiff. But, definitely. Yeah," Emmeline said. She grinned at Hermione. "I idolized her too. This was before the Ladder of Magic paper. Healer Goswami is a revelation too."

Hermione nodded, eagerly. Merlin, she liked Emmeline. Emmeline thought she was insane, but Hermione could tell that she was starting to like her, which would make Ron telling her suck even more. It wasn't fair that Ron hadn't told her about them when Hermione had to live through Harry's constant teasing.

"I think this year is the moving on," Emmeline announced, slapping Creature Quarterly shut. Hermione jumped, stirred out of her inner thoughts.

"Eh? Moving on?" Hermione asked.

Emmeline hummed, nodding quite firmly. "Last year was the year of, like, learning stuff," Emmeline said as if Hermione was supposed to know what the *fuck* that meant. "But, this year. It's all about moving on. We're both moving on, aren't we?"

Hermione was paralyzed for half a second before she gathered her wits. "Yeah. Moving on. I get that. Of course. We should move on," she said. The longer she spoke, the more broken and robotic she sounded.

Emmeline watched for a long, long moment. Hermione felt like she was going to start sweating at any moment.

"Are you hiding something from me, Hermione?" Emmeline asked softly.

Hermione jerked in her seat, shaking her head. "Um. No."

She'd never *lied* to an authority figure before. It didn't feel so great. Actually, it felt like Hermione was going to vomit, and she wouldn't survive farting in front of her boyfriend and vomiting in front of her boss all one day. She really couldn't.

"I think you're lying. I don't like liars, Hermione," Emmeline warned.

Hermione clapped a hand to her mouth as bile turned in her stomach.

"No, I'm—" she said, her voice muffled.

Emmeline broke into a vicious round of cackles, and Hermione jerked, her hand falling into her lap as Emmeline trembled so hard from her laughter, she knocked over her tea and spilled it over that quarter's magazine. Emmeline corrected her mistake with a simple wave of her wand.

"Ron told me," Emmeline said with a shark's grin. Hermione's jaw dropped open. "I just like seeing you squirm."

DIAGNOSIS

"Okay. Ernest 'Ernie' Macmillan, age 20, diagnosed last month with what was believed to be Lovesickness," Harry rattled off, looking down at his parchment scroll. He looked up through his eyelashes at the young man on the bed in front of him. He was blonde and kinda shrimpy, but cute. Curled up against his side was a blonde woman that was either his girlfriend or his sister.

Harry repressed a shudder at that thought.

"Lovesickness," Tom murmured softly. He leaned over, his lips hovering over Harry's ear. Harry took a deep breath to stop himself from stiffening. "How did he make it past screening? He should be in an addiction program."

"Wait for it," Harry muttered from the corner of his mouth. "It was *believed* to be Lovesickness until Mr. Macmillan complained of respiratory problems and coughed up petals. It's more appropriate to say that Mr. Macmillan has Hanahaki Disease."

Tom paused and he glanced down at Harry.

"You find me the best cases," Tom said admiringly.

Harry snorted. "I do what I can," he said before he strode forward, glancing at the pair on the bed. "How are you today, Mr. Macmillan?"

"Had a bit of a cough today, but I'm alright now," Ernie said with a wane smile. Tom hummed to himself, looking over his new patient before he glanced at the girl curled in his bed.

"And this is?" Tom asked.

"Leanne. My girlfriend," Ernie said with a sweet smile, looking over at Leanne. Leanne squirmed, giving an uncomfortable smile, but didn't say anything just yet.

Harry and Tom exchanged glances.

A young couple. And only *one* of them had Hanahaki Disease.

Harry opened his mouth to inquire about the situation, but Tom interrupted him with a look and a quick question. “Healer Potter, can you tell me what Hanahaki Disease is?”

Harry stared at him in disbelief. Tom’s eyes narrowed.

“Hanahaki Disease is a respiratory tract infection that develops over months, beginning with the involuntary coughing up of flower petals, and growing in intensity until the patient begins to vomit entire flowers, by which point, the disease has entered its final stages,” Harry said firmly. He crossed his arms over his chest, regarding Ernie Macmillan for a long moment. “Typically, at this point, we would conduct an internal procedure and proceed to give Mr. Macmillan a potion to kill the flowers in his lungs, and then proceed to remove them. Mr. Macmillan doesn’t agree with this track of treatment.”

Tom looked at Ernie as if he’d suddenly gotten ten times more interesting. The tall man began to pace at the end of the bed, looking down at the notes in his hands before he looked up again, stopping so suddenly that both Ernie and Leanne jumped.

“Why?” Tom asked coldly.

“When the flowers are removed, so are the emotions and the memories. It stunts the patient’s ability to love as well,” Ernie said firmly.

Tom scoffed. “If done incorrectly.”

“It’s inconsistent. I’ve read all the medical journals about it. We have,” Ernie said, and he reached out to grab Leanne’s hand. She tightened her hand around his, huddling closer, eyes flashing with a quiet protectiveness.

"Would I be correct in assuming that Miss Leanne is the...reason for your current predicament?" Tom asked, voice lofty but void of judgment. Harry wondered how he could do it when Leanne was just sitting there as if nothing was wrong.

“She’s not the reason for anything,” Ernie said, his voice suddenly cold.

Leanne lifted her chin, having finally found her voice. “Healer Riddle, we sought you out because you’re the best of the best and we’re willing to do anything except...*remove* the flowers,” Leanne said, her voice cracking before regaining strength. She stared between the two Healers, utterly defiant.

“You do understand that the roots are burrowing into the walls of his lungs? They will wrap around his trachea or, if they wrap around his heart, send him into cardiac arrest. He will die. Do you both understand that?” Tom asked curiously.

Ernie’s gaze was stern. Before he could speak, Leanne said, “You’re the best. You’re the only one that could do it.”

While Harry’s lips curled in irritation, Tom looked nearly impressed.

“What kind of flowers are they?” Tom asked.

“Daffodils, primroses, and rue,” Leanne recited. Now that she had spoken once, she seemed to have lost her layer of uncertainty. She slid off the bed, going towards the beaten messenger bag that sat in the lone chair in the room. She pulled out a stack of medical journals—some quite old and ragged. “We’ve done our research. If this would help…”

“Don’t say ‘we’, love. You. She’s the one that found the application to your study. About how you were looking for impossible cases and that you would do *anything*," Ernie said as if he had any idea what ‘anything' meant to Tom or Harry. Harry was reminded of how easy it was for Tom to cast the Killing Curse. He suppressed his flinch.

He still had to unpack *that* mess.

“Harry, I’d like to speak with Miss Leanne, one-on-one,” Tom said into Harry’s ear after a long moment.

“What. Why?” Harry asked, wide-eyed.

Tom looked at him as if he were stupid. “She’s the object of Mr. Macmillan’s affections. I’m sure she has had quite the insight on this...unique disease. While I speak with her in my office, I’d like for you to check the progress of the disease so I know what stage we’re at. If he coughs, collect any samples for potential testing.”

Harry huffed under his breath, nodding. "She shouldn't be here," he hissed at Tom, cutting a glance at Leanne, but the young couple was lost in one another again, reorganizing the notes and medical journals for Tom's perusal.

“Harry,” Tom said firmly, before he took a step away, and glanced over at the pair. “If you would, Miss Leanne, I have a few questions for you.”

Leanne looked surprised, but she nodded firmly. She gathered the medical journals and notes to her chest. She swooped down, pressing a quick kiss to Ernie’s lips, before she paraded out of the room, her mouth already running a mile a minute.

“I don’t know if you know what potions he’s on, but he’s on a regiment of Pepperup that's laced with peppermint, and after a fit, he has both a Calming Draught and—"

The door swung shut, muffling any other sound from entering the small room, leaving Harry and Ernie alone. Ernie had a wry smile on his face that felt all too knowing. Harry cleared his throat awkwardly and smiled.

"Okay, Mr. Macmillan...Ernie," Harry corrected after Ernie made a face. "I'm just going to check how far your illness has progressed so we know what we're working with."

Harry pulled his wand and muttered the diagnostics charm under his breath. He let the information wash over him: an inflamed trachea, larynx, and bronchi; full-blown Hanahaki Disease and swiftly entering the last phase—a full blossom. The left lung was healthier, with only small branches of rue spindling up towards the trachea. But, the right was a mess. Harry pressed his wand to Ernie’s sternum.

“*Mésavlépe*,” Harry murmured, allowing himself a peek into Ernie’s chest without cracking him open. He nearly reared back.

They’d be *lucky* if the right lung was salvageable. It was a mess of brambles and roots entwining and choking the tender organ. The primroses and daffodils had fully blossomed, some of the petals already falling from the heads of the flowers.

“How’s it looking, doc?” Ernie asked with a wry grin.

Harry looked up, wide-eyed. “Muggle lingo?”

“Leanne’s a Muggleborn,” Ernie said with a shrug.

Harry hummed. “I see. My mother’s a Muggleborn.”

“I know. Your mother is Lily Evans,” Ernie said. He didn’t look very apologetic about knowing intimate details about his Healer’s life. “Leanne was very thorough in her research. She wanted to know if Healer Riddle’s assistant was good too.”

“I am,” Harry said immediately. Ernie jerked back, eyes wide. Harry smirked. “Is that alarming? That I accept that I’m good without prompting?”

“It shouldn’t be,” Ernie allowed.

Harry couldn’t help his grin. “I like you, Ernie Macmillan.”

Even as Harry spoke, he took his quill from inside his robes and jotted down quick notes onto the short piece of parchment, taking note of all of the young man’s symptoms. Waxy skin, dark under eyes and a pair of lungs working at 60% capacity maximum.

“Thanks,” Ernie said. He leaned forward, as if conspiratorial. “You don’t like my girlfriend though.”

Harry froze and he slowly looked up. Before he could respond, Ernie jerked forward and the most horrible cough echoed through the room. With a speed Harry didn’t recognize, he Conjured a bucket and thrust it into Ernie’s lap just as he doubled over and began to cough violently. The barking cough sounded painful and harsh choking sounds interrupted the fit. Suddenly, blood and crimson-streak white petals spilled into the basin, interspersed with stalks of rue.

Ernie sat up, blood streaming and gathering at the tip of his chin, the head of a daffodil pressed between his lips. He spat it out into the basin, trembling with the force of his coughs.

Harry turned as he went through his fit and began to gather the potions necessary. When the fit seemed like it was coming to an end, Ernie stuck out his hand.

“Take this Calming Draught first. Then, the Pepperup. The other way around will make you nauseous," Harry said firmly, passing along the potions and a long strip of linen. Ernie did as he was told, mopping up the wet blood from his chin.

The room smelled like copper.

Ernie fell back against his mountain of pillows, wane and exhausted looking. He smiled, weakly.

“At least she wasn’t here for this one. I’ve never spit up a whole flower,” Ernie said, voice hoarse and cracking. “Is that good or bad?”

Harry frowned. Bad.

It meant fresh ones would spring up in its place.

DIAGNOSIS

“What did you get in Defense, Weasley?” Bellatrix asked as she sauntered down the hallway, her heels clicking. Ron skulked after her.

Sometimes, he loathed Bellatrix Black—mostly for being his height. She was already tall, and then her heels made her even taller so that looked him in the eye. He was used to being intimidated by women shorter than him—i.e. His girlfriend—but Bellatrix being his height only heaped on the terror. And she was so scary good, too. Ugh.

“An O on my OWLs and an E on my NEWTs,” Ron muttered.

Bellatrix tutted. “That won’t do, Weasley,” she murmured condescendingly. “We’ll have to start you on the basics.”

“I don’t really *need* the basics. I did well on my practical—” Ron began.

Bellatrix hummed. “And that would be fine if you were an Auror. But, mediwizardry is all about the theoretical in terms of Defense, and the practical in Healing. You need both.”

“I thought you said it was all about strategy,” Ron retorted.

“That too,” Rodolphus interjected as he sidled up to the pair. Ron rolled his eyes dramatically and sighed. “And how are we torturing our student today, Bella?”

“*My* student,” Bellatrix snarled. She spun to look at Ron again. “As a mediwizard, you may be called up to the field by the Ministry. Talk to me about possible avenues.”

Ron looked bewildered for just a moment before he launched into an explanation. "I could be called to take part in a hit team as their Healer. I could be called to the scene of a crime like we were before. And then, I could be placed on the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad."

“And the principles of a Healer of the AMRS?” Rodolphus asked.

Ron opened his mouth and then shut it again, brow furrowed in confusion.

“Rodolphus, go get your own student,” Bellatrix snarled through clenched teeth. She glanced over at Ron and huffed, shaking her head. “What do they even teach you in Healing at Hogwarts?”

“The basics? Basic Healing, lots of theoretical readings. Lots of Healer Evans’ papers,” Ron said and he crossed his arms. “It’s all theory and all taught with the implication that we’ll be going into something like Spell Damage.”

“How biased,” Rodolphus sang.

“Ugh. Someone needs to talk to Dippet,” Bellatrix groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. She came to a stop in the long trauma hall and pointed at Ron, directing him towards the desk of operations. She sat on the edge of it, looking down at him and then at the basket of unfolded linen bandages on the chair.

“What?” Ron asked. He leaned forward, eyes wide with excitement. “Is there a cool case?”

“What do we do if there are cases, Weasley?” Bellatrix asked snidely. “We run. We weren’t running. Fold the linens. By hand.”

“What. *Why*?” Ron whinged. “I can do it twice as fast with magic!”

“Because! You need something to do while I lecture you and because I said so,” Bellatrix growled, lowering her head until the tips of their noses were nearly touching. Ron flinched back, making Bellatrix smile a terrible grin as she leaned back on her hands and began. “As mediwizards, our principles are different from Healers. They follow the black and white principle of ‘do no harm’. Sometimes, we, as mediwizards, must do harm to make sure our patients live.”

Rodolphus nodded, seemingly impressed by how she explained.

“Our principles are simple: ABC,” Rodolphus interjected.

“Did I *ask* for you to interrupt?” Bellatrix said, spinning on him with a snarl. Rodolphus grinned lazily at her and shrugged. “Air. Blood. Calm. ABC. The first thing you do is make sure that your patient is breathing. Otherwise, it doesn’t matter. Second: blood. Make sure the blood is circulating.”

“What happens if the patient is cold? Blood has stopped circulating then. Do I call it?” Ron asked as he folded the linens.

“A patient’s not dead until they’re warm and dead,” Rodolphus said firmly. He turned back to Bellatrix, leaning forward. “We need to talk to Tom. Or get him talking to us.”

Bellatrix huffed. "I tried. I gave him a croissant from our favorite place and he vomited on my shoes," Bellatrix said coldly. Ron muffled his laughter into his sleeve and then promptly silenced himself after a poisonous stare from Bellatrix. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm teaching. C is for calm. Always have a Calming Draught ready. If that's not enough: sedate

them. Put them in a magical coma. Some patients are easier. Some are more difficult. You'll know at the moment."

Rodolphus let out a dramatic sigh and he fell onto the desk, knocking over Ron's careful stack of bandages.

"Bloody hell," Ron hissed under his breath as he gathered them and stepped back when Rodolphus leaned forward, bracketing Bellatrix's thighs with his hands.

"That wasn't enough. You knew that wouldn't be enough," Rodolphus said pointedly.

Bellatrix hummed. Almost subconsciously, she began to run her fingers through Rodolphus' hair. "What does he want, do you think? A fucking parade?" Bellatrix snapped under her breath.

"Well, we did betray him. Something rare, yes? A rare medical journal. Or perhaps a few really, really good cases," Rodolphus suggested weakly.

Bellatrix slapped Rodolphus in the back of his head. "Stupid idea. He has the Gorsemoor Grant and whatever he's doing...well, he's already getting the *best* cases," Bellatrix sighed, she rubbed at her bottom lip, smearing some of her dark purple lipstick somewhat. It was the first time that Ron had ever seen her even slightly out of place.

At least, physically. Bellatrix was always out of place, mentally.

Both mediwizards stared at each other as if the answer would suddenly fall into place.

"Have you considered saying the words 'I am sorry'?" Ron asked, his voice properly snarky as he busied himself with folding the bandages *again*, despite the fact that bandages could be fucking *Conjured*, and Bellatrix was just being a jackarse for making him fold them.

When he didn't hear movement behind him, he frowned. He looked over his shoulder.

Bellatrix and Rodolphus were frozen, a look of dawning enlightenment washing over their faces.

"Whoa," Rodolphus mumbled.

Ron blinked as he realized that these two were apparently humanity's finest pair of mediwizards and they hadn't even considered *apologizing*.

What a pair of fucking bastards.

DIAGNOSIS

"Harry."

Her voice cut through all of the distraction like a knife. It was the presence that she possessed that had always made Harry both admire and hate his mother. She was already tall and

statuesque, her hair dark like a burning coal. But, her voice—Merlin, sometimes Harry *hated* her voice. Full of expectation.

“Mother,” Harry said, turning towards her. Immediately, his irritation melted away as he spotted his mother’s companion. He couldn’t fight the smile spreading across his face. “Lavender.”

“What’s with the face? What were you pouting about?” Lavender teased as the pair finally met Harry. Harry rolled his eyes and elected to not answer his troublesome little sister. Instead, he pulled her into a headlock, ruffling her sweet honey curls. “Oh my *God,* Harry. You are so *annoying*!”

Her squeal of rage brought joy into Harry’s blackened little heart.

“Thanks,” he snickered into her hair, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head. Lavender jerked out of his hold, shoving him roughly. Harry cursed his breath when she slammed her cane into his shin, mercilessly. “*Ow!* Unnecessary!”

“Quite,” Lily said, unimpressed. She held her hand out. “The cane, Lavender.”

Lavender pouted but didn't argue with her mother, passing over the bubblegum pink cane.

"You don't need it anymore?" Harry asked, his teeth gritted through the stinging pain.

"I just got the all clear today. I can go back to school and everything," Lavender said with a broad grin. She leaned forward, eyes wide. "Dad said that I don't have to go back now and that I can just go back for my NEWT year because sixth year isn't important."

Lily looked like she’d just sucked on a lemon. Harry smothered his obnoxious laughter. Her face was priceless.

“I am inclined to disagree, but her Mind Healer does think that it would disrupt the Healing for her to return so suddenly, and towards the end of the school year,” Lily said stiffly. Lavender nodded, a certain air of smugness about her that Harry recognized as a product of his parents’ arrogance. It certainly wasn’t pleasant when turned against them, he was sure.

“So, I’m helping Mum plan the St. Mungo’s fundraiser. We’re going desert testing now,” Lavender said with a grin and a certain air of importance.

“Don’t you have to study or something? Does Mum not tutor you?” Harry asked, cutting a glance at Lily.

“Oh, she quizzes me on random potion ingredient very five minutes. I’m practically a Healer,” Lavender declared.

Harry snorted. “Okay.”

“Her dreadful lack of knowledge makes me think that there should be a programme installed before any student is allowed to enter as a trainee. We need to weed out the weak earlier,” Lily said quite certainly. She looked at Lavender, a certain glint in her eye that Harry didn't

quite recognize. "Lavender's progress proves to me that our family's talents in Healing is very much nurture. Not nature."

Harry's heart warmed at the pride that entered Lavender's eyes.

"But, you don't have to be a Healer," Harry reminded her. "Not if you don't want to. You can be anything."

"Within reason," Lily added up quickly. Harry glared at her and Lily shrugged. "We don't want her to be something silly. Like your father."

"Dad is Head Auror?" Lavender said.

"Your dad is a reckless, arrogant toe-rag that lives for adrenaline's sake. No Auroring. I won't allow you to be as reckless and suicidal as him, the silly man," Lily said. The raw affection in her voice when she spoke of her husband made Harry cringe.

"Ew. You love Dad."

Lily snorted. "Yes, Harry. I love your father."

"I mean...I knew," Harry said. "But, like, I didn't *know*."

"That made sense," Lavender mocked.

Lily cleared her throat and both of her children looked at her, amused. She looked as if she were working herself up to something. Lily cleared her throat.

"Harry, have you found an escort yet?" Lily asked.

Harry choked on air. "I'm sorry?"

"Have you found a date?" Lily reiterated.

"Does it...*matter*?" Harry asked.

Lily's nose wrinkled. "Despite my career ambitions, by the time I was your age, I was in a long-term relationship with your father. A partner does not complete you, but does provide emotional satisfaction when—"

"Mum, are you telling me that you want to be a grandmum?" Harry asked in horrified awe. Lily shifted, running her hand down the front of her button down, retucking it into her bottle green trousers. Lavender looked delighted.

"Not anytime soon, mind you. There's quite a bit more for you to accomplish, but there are always children to be adopted. It's never too soon to search for a potential life partner to co-parent with," Lily said imperiously as if her stiff way of speaking could hide what she was truly saying. Lavender had a wicked grin on her face.

"He already found a potential life-partner," Lavender said slyly. "Tom *Ri*—"

Lily clapped a hand over Lavender's hand and swiftly pulled her into a headlock. Harry cackled.

"None of that now. Preferably a life-partner that is your equal, thank you," Lily said firmly.

Harry hummed. "Some would say that he's the better half."

"Some would be liars," Lily said coldly.

Harry's little black heart warmed like coal.

"Being a stay-at-home mum has changed you," Harry said softly.

Lily stilled, her hand slipped from Lavender's mouth though the headlock was unyielding. Lavender looked between her mother and her brother. Lily seemed to be contemplating her words carefully. Suddenly, she just smiled.

"Good. I hope so."

DIAGNOSIS

"Tom! Tom!"

"Tom!"

Harry frowned in confusion and went to look over his shoulder. Tom grabbed him sharply, tugging him forward, shaking his head. "Don't look back. It encourages them."

"'Them'?" Harry asked.

"Tom! I know you can hear us!" they called out again, and slowly, Harry recognized the voice as belonging to Rodolphus Lestrange. So, if that was Rodolphus Lestrange, the other was—*ugh*—Bellatrix, then.

Tom stopped in his brisk walking and turned, sharply. He looked both hunted and like the hunter, his lips curling back predatorily. Bellatrix and Rodolphus skidded to a stop in front of him, panting hard, clinging to one another to keep themselves upward. Tom lifted his chin, humming, his teeth exposed nastily.

"What. Do. You. Want?" he snarled.

"I'm sorry," Bellatrix blurted out. Harry's eyes widened as Tom's sneer dropped immediately in surprise before smoothing out into something too neutral for words. "I'm so, so sorry. I'm a fucking idiot. I went behind your back. I cheated on you. You weren't good to me, but I was horrible to you too. And I'm sorry."

“You are,” Tom spat back, spitefully.

“I’m sorry, too,” Rodolphus rasped. “I’m not sure for loving her. I couldn’t be sorry for loving her just like you can’t be sorry for loving him—” and he nodded at Harry. Harry’s cheeks exploded in color and Tom stiffened. “—but, I’m sorry for not talking to you about it. I’m sorry for going behind your back. I’m sorry for betraying you.”

Tom's left eye was twitching as if he had no idea what to do with the onslaught of emotion. He took a deep breath, scratching at his hairline for a moment.

“Why are you insisting on speaking with me?” Tom hissed quietly, looking around as if terrified someone was going to come upon them in the deserted corridor.

“Because you were my first friend,” Rodolphus said quickly. “We did everything together.”

“We lived together,” Bellatrix continued on. “We fought and hated and played pranks together. We decided we were going to be Healers together. We were important to one another. You’re still important to us.”

“We’re your family. Your *real* one,” Rodolphus said, as if that held meaning, and maybe that did.

Sometimes, Harry forgot that Tom had his own history before their history of ‘Tom and Harry’. Tom jerked at the words: ‘your real one’. And suddenly, Harry was filled with a flash of overwhelming, spiteful jealousy.

“Tom—” Harry began softly.

Tom didn’t seem to hear him, watching them carefully. “I don’t know,” he said quietly. He seemed confused. He always knew. Except, when he didn’t. “I don’t know if I want to forgive you.”

“You don’t have to know now,” Bellatrix blurted out. “I just...we just want you to know we’re sorry. We’re stupid idiots that are sorry.”

“O...kay,” Tom said in a drawn out whisper.

Rodolphus and Bellatrix looked at one another before looking back at Tom. Bellatrix smiled —a brave, little smile that made Harry *hate.* As if she were sacrificing something, as if she was the brave one for waiting for Tom to accept her apology. Merlin, Harry had never hated a person more in his entire life. And still, neither Rodolphus or Bellatrix looked at him, and Harry felt infinitely smaller.

“We’re not...we can’t make anything better. But, we can be better. We promise,” Bellatrix said and she took Rodolphus by the wrist and walked away. Harry looked between Tom and the pair, Rodolphus and Bellatrix.

Be his family and remind him of his own, Dumbledore had asked of him. Sometimes, it felt like the man had asked too much because Tom and his issues—*his* family—were exhausting. So, so exhausting.

But, Harry didn't have to wait long. Tom swallowed hard and turned on his heel, stalking away from them. His expression was impassive, but Harry could see the turmoil in those dark burgundy eyes. Merlin, Harry hated the pair. They had just nearly made it into Tom's office again to discuss their next plan of action of Macmillan's case when another voice called Tom's name.

"What now?" Harry snarled under his breath. He turned and immediately felt regret when he saw the woman flouncing down the hallway, blonde hair waving down her back, her wand tucked behind her ear. "Hi, Luna."

"Hello," Luna said kindly. She turned to the man she had called, grey eyes wide. Gravely, she said, "Hello, Tom."

Just as gravely, Tom said, "Hello, Luna. What can I do for you?"

Harry's lips curled into an amused smile.

"Would you like to be my escort to the St. Mungo's fundraiser?" Luna asked.

Tom tilted his head, regarding Luna for a long moment. Harry's smile was frozen. Sirens rang in his ears as he looked between the two department Heads.

"As coworkers?" Tom asked.

Luna shrugged. "Yes. I've never been anywhere with someone as coworkers," she said quite seriously.

"Why not."

Luna beamed and nodded. She looked over at Harry and winked before she turned on her heel and, honest to God, skipped away. Tom shrugged and continued down the hallway. Harry was frozen, nostrils flaring.

Harry was *no longer* amused.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry tried not to wince as he swapped out the bucket that was now full of bile, blood, and flower petals for an empty basin. Ernie looked up through frail eyelashes, gratitude in his light eyes as he went back to coughing and vomiting up petals. The room stank of blood and pollen. Leanne was immovable in the corner, watching like a gargoyle. Harry scowled.

"Where's Healer Riddle?" Leanne asked, speaking of Ernie's coughs.

Ernie's fit subsided slightly. "L-Leanne...sweetheart, it's fine," Ernie said. "Healer Riddle has other patients t—"

He coughed harshly again, pulling at the full daffodil that peeked between his lips.

“Don’t pull it or you’ll damage your trachea further. Let me get it if it’s too caught,” Harry warned. Ernie looked over at him and gave a thumbs up as he succumbed to another fit, coughing. The flower didn’t budge. Harry cleared his throat, pointing his wand. “*Anapneo.*”

Leanne and Harry watched as with a mighty wheeze, the flower and its stalk spilled from Ernie's mouth into the basin. Leanne was at his side the second it ended, passing him his potions.

“Pepperup and then—” Leanne started.

“Other way around or it'll increase his nausea,” Harry said coolly. Leanne jerked back, eyes wide.

“But, the other Healers—”

“I’m sorry, but you aren’t an Healer and those other Healers aren’t *me*. Other way around,” Harry said firmly, brooking no argument. He gave an indulgent, satisfied smile when Ernie did as he commanded, despite Leanne’s scowl. “Good. Healer Riddle is in his office currently looking into possible paths of treatment. This is a late-stage case, so our options are...limited.”

“What do you mean limited?” Leanne asked before Ernie could.

Harry’s lips twisted into a frown. “Well, removal is no longer an option.”

“It was never an option,” Ernie reminded him.

“Of course,” Harry said indulgently. “But, even if we wanted to...prune the illness, it would be impossible. It’s already negatively impacted your lung capacity to half of what it should be. It’s a complex disease, something that there isn’t a lot of research on.”

Leanne shook her head, looking over at Ernie. “We should’ve gone with Lovegood.”

“Lovegood specializes in children,” Harry said coldly. “Tom Riddle is the best at what he does.”

“What he does is Spell Damage. Hanahaki Disease is a magical illness. We should’ve gone to a specialist,” Leanne countered. She nuzzled against Ernie’s shoulder and he patted a rhythm against her thigh that seemed to calm her almost. He hummed.

“We did,” Ernie insisted, his voice sounding raw and scraped.

“He’s right,” Harry said stiffly. He took a step closer, grabbing the end of the bed. Both Leanne and Ernie looked at him, wide-eyed. “If I’m being honest, nobody in this hospital, or any other, would have ever touched your case. It’s impossible. The flowers are in full blossom. Your odds aren’t good. But, we take the impossible cases.”

“How impossible?” Ernie asked.

Harry smiled, wryly. “We are prepared to take *extreme* measures,” he said instead.

“It’s not enough. He’s in pai—”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Harry said as if he hadn’t heard Leanne. “I’ll get you a potion for your throat. I want to get a prescription for a restorative potion for your trachea and vocal chords.”

“Usually, Healers just use Episkey. That’s what we’ve been told to do if he has a fit at home,” Leanne said.

Harry turned to look at her as if she were nothing but scum on the bottom of his shoe. “The stress of recurrent *Espikeys* will make his trachea collapse. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Harry stepped out of the room, quickly making his ways towards the lift. With each step away from Leanne and Ernie, he felt the strange tightness in his chest ease up. Until the door opened and footsteps approached.

“Healer Potter! Healer Potter!”

Harry turned on his heel, glaring. “Did you need something?”

“I...would appreciate if you didn’t speak to me like I was an idiot,” Leanne said calmly.

“Hmm,” Harry hummed. “Ernie is a kind man.”

“He is. I would still appreciate if you corrected your tone,” Leanne snapped, her attitude flaring.

Harry scoffed. “I’m just doing my job, miss.”

“You’re supposedly doing your job, but you just told me that his options are slim. That he’s dying,” Leanne returned just as fast and Harry leaned forward, an amused, morbid smile on his face.

“Well. He is. That’s no fault of mine, is it?”

“Why can’t you just do your job right? Then, he wouldn’t be in so much—” Leanne stammered, working herself up into a fury.

Then, Harry snapped.

“Why can’t you love him like he should be loved?” Harry snarled.

Leanne jerked back, wide-eyed. “I-I’m…”

“No,” Harry barked out. Leanne fell silent again. “You don’t get to come in here while he’s in the *final* stages of a disease that is *your* fault and then, ask why I can’t do my job right? I’m doing my job. I’m trying to make sure that he lives. You should’ve done *your* job. Loved him. And then, he wouldn’t be here.”

Leanne flinched back violently and she let out a quiet sob. Harry's expression was like stone. He glanced at Ernie's body before turning his gaze back to Leanne. She was wiping the tears from her face, her notes crumpled between clenched fists. She was staring down at her feet, and Harry felt vicious satisfaction rip through him as he stared at Leanne. Good. She deserved to feel shitty.

“I didn’t...you’re supposed to *help* him,” Leanne said. When she looked up, Harry’s eyes widened. Leanne wasn’t *sad*. She wiped her tears of fury from her face. "I read that you and Healer Riddle were good! The best. I read about your project after we got him in. I’ve signed so many forms and done so much research. Don’t accuse me of not caring!”

Harry scoffed. “If you cared—”

“No,” Leanne snarled. “I care. I don’t love him. That’s true. Not in the way he loves me. I’ve known Ernie since we were kids. And he’s loved me for a very long time. And only recently, I’m seeing him in a different light. And it’s not enough. It’s not fast enough. I know that. But, that’s not my *fault.* You don’t choose when or how you fall in love with someone. Maybe, you don’t understand that, but I do. This isn’t my fault.”

You don’t choose when or how you fall in love with someone.

The words echoed in his ears horrible. Harry wanted to flinch away from those horribly revealing, invasive words. As if Leanne could see into his soul, into all of his deepest insecurities and throw them right back in his face. It only made him more vicious.

“You are a self—”

“*Excusez-moi, je trouve que je—*”

“I think she’s lost,” Leanne said, her voice quite cold.

Harry flinched, turning to look at the young woman that had interrupted them. Astoria Greengrass was a talented actress. She had fooled him the first time that they had met with her French, but he wouldn't be fooled again. Harry prepared to call her out, but then, Astoria's little confused mask slipped away, revealing the coldest expression that Harry had ever been met with in his life.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said stiffly to Leanne before he stormed down the hall, leaving Astoria behind. Astoria caught up easily, grabbing Harry’s elbow and yanking him into an empty room.

The hospital bed was stripped of any sheets, with only a shitty mattress on top. It was strangely sterile and bright, making Astoria look even stranger. And then, Harry realized how heavily he was breathing and how his stomach turned. He took a step towards Astoria before he crumpled onto the edge of the bed and he doubled over, wheezing.

Astoria dropped to her knees in front of him, anchoring herself on his thighs.

“Breathe, Harry,” she said, her accent even thicker than Draco’s typical drawl. Harry looked at her, wild-eyed. Astoria’s sternness didn’t falter. “Breathe. You cannot hyperventilate right now. You have a patient to take care of. Breathe.”

He took several deep breaths, the air dragging in slowly and then rattling out painfully, until he no longer felt lightheaded or like he was going to vomit at any second. Astoria stared at him, impassively. She tilted her head and leaned forward, tilting his chin up from between his knees.

“Why did you pull me away?” Harry asked.

Astoria still didn’t answer, looking him in the eye. “Your pupils are no longer dilated. Do you need a Calming Draught?” she asked.

“No,” Harry said quietly.

Astoria nodded. “Good. You screamed at a patient’s family,” Astoria said.

“I know.”

“That is a blight on the fabric of professionalism.”

“I *know*,” Harry spat, still angry at Leanne, but even angrier at himself. “Are you going to report me or what? It’s a fireable offense and I know you don’t like me because I’m a whore or whatever.”

Astoria’s gaze sharpened. “I do not like you because you do not like me.”

"You told my mother my private conversations with my ex-boyfriend," Harry snarled.

Astoria lifted her chin. "Are you not loyal to your teacher to a fault? Would you not tell Riddle anything?" Astoria demanded. Harry faltered. Astoria continued on. "It was not my place, but I am loyal to Lily. I do not like you because you think the whole world is against you. You are not important enough in the grand scheme of the world for the entirety of the world to be against you. You are one person. The world is not against you. You are."

Harry’s eyes widened. “You don’t know me.”

“I know you, Harry Potter. I know you,” Astoria huffed. “You think I do not because I do not talk to you every day. We do not have lunch together because you do not like my best friend and you think that I am so cold. Maybe. But, I know you. I know you are better than what just happened. You must apologize.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He had known that before she even said it.

“I know,” Harry sighed.

“You say that a lot. You know. If you knew, you would not have done it. Why did you do it?”

“Because another one of my patients is dying and she is the only one that can help him. But, she won’t,” Harry said, his voice cracking. “And I’m so tired, Astoria. I am so tired of my patients dying, alone and loveless. I know what it is to be alone and loveless. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone, especially on the brink of death. But, I am so, *so* tired of failing these people. And he could be one of the people that lives. He could. If she helped him. But, she won’t.”

“Maybe, she can’t.”

“If you loved someone—”

“Maybe, she doesn’t. Love him. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t care. And maybe she does love him. But, it doesn’t matter if he doesn’t believe her. And these are things that we can talk about all we want. But, it doesn’t matter because that’s not the job,” Astoria said thoughtfully. She leaned forward, tapping her chin with the tip of her wand as she regarded Harry with those uncomfortably shrewd eyes.

“Don’t you understand where I’m coming from though?” Harry asked.

Astoria huffed. “Of course, I do. You think I am a soulless automaton. You and your friends. But, I feel. Deeply. But, not on the job,” Astoria said carefully. She laughed suddenly, a stilted strange thing that was still so genuine it hurt. “You Englishmen and women...they say that you are so cold and detached. But, you are all so emotional. Do not ruin your career over it.”

“You sound like my mother,” Harry snapped. “She thought emotions would ruin her career. Instead, they ruined her family.”

“You are not ruined,” Astoria scoffed. “You were created in your mother’s imperfect image into something that could be closer to perfect than she is. The world is not against you. You are.”

“Stop saying—” Harry said, rolling his eyes.

“Have you ever told someone that their loved one has died?”

“No,” Harry said, his voice cracking. “I...I haven’t.”

Astoria hummed.

“I understand. It is hard. It is the worst when it is a child that has died,” Astoria said quietly. She looked thoughtful, and Harry was reminded of the fact that this was a woman that had *chosen* to work in the Children's Ward, to bring tiny humans back to life or to see them to their deaths. It wasn't a job for the weak. "It's more than just a list of points you've memorized. Yours is the face they will remember for the rest of their life. They were fine before they met you. You give them the worst news of their entire life. You are changing this person's life forever. You are responsible for this moment. For the instant that person goes from wife to widow, from father to fatherless, from someone's children to orphans, it's you. This person isn't an inconvenience. They are not a box on a list to be checked off. You are a

part of their life now. So take that seriously. Recognize the importance of your role. And respect the fact that the person's pain is the biggest thing in the room."

DIAGNOSIS

“This fucking *sucks,*" Harry said snippily, slamming his tray down in front of Hermione. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him but didn't say anything immediately, waiting for Harry to elaborate. "I just had to apologize to his girlfriend for being a fucking asshole because...surprise, surprise, I was a fucking asshole to her. Because another one of my patients is going to die and I'm definitely getting attached because his girlfriend is emotionally unavailable like Tom, and I can't deal with it."

Hermione blinked.

“You don’t know that your patient is going to die,” Hermione warned.

Harry snorted. “Oh. I know.”

“Emmeline knows. About Ron and I. He told her,” Hermione said.

Harry’s eyes widened at the juicy bit of gossip. “*Interesting*…did you guys talk about it?”

“I mean. Not really. She said about it being the year of ‘realizing stuff’, whatever that means, and ‘moving on’. She wants to move on. I think she’s doing pub nights with Ron again,” Hermione said.

“Does that bother you?” Harry asked, leaning forward.

Hermione scoffed. “Would it bother you if Tom started hanging out with Bellatrix again?”

“I mean, yes,” Harry admitted.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. No. It wouldn’t bother me. Ron’s an adult. He does as he pleases. He doesn’t tell me what to do and I don’t tell him what to do. He puts up with my crazy and I put up with his...Ron-ishness," Hermione said, a small smile playing on her face. She leaned forward, a strange light in her eyes. "It doesn't hurt that he's good in bed."

“*Merlin,* don’t tell me that,” Harry groaned. “I haven’t had sex since Tom.”

“Really?” Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. “Yeah, really. I need dick or I’m going to *die.*”

“The world is your oyster. I bet I can find five people in this room that want to have sex with you,” Hermione said firmly.

“Well, yeah, but that’s probably because they think I’m good for it. Tom never thought I was good for it. He *worked* for me," Harry said, looking far away at the moment as he reminisced. He ignored the shrewd look in Hermione's eyes. "Anyway, my mum wants me to find a date for the fundraiser."

“Ron hasn’t asked me!” Hermione blurted out.

“Do you need to be asked? I thought that now that you’re together, it’s implied that you’d attend all joint-social functions together?” Harry asked.

Hermione hesitated. Harry straightened in his seat, absently reaching over the table to grab a chip from her plate. She didn’t even slap his hand away.

“He’s turned me into a stupid emotional girl who cares,” Hermione muttered under her breath, shaking her head. Slowly, she looked up. Harry thought she looked a little haunted, and he couldn’t help rocking back and forth in his chair in excitement. “I trumped.”

Harry dropped the half-eaten chip from his mouth.

“No.”

Hermione groaned, hiding her face in her hands. “Yes,” she muttered against her palms.

“*No!* You did *not!*” Harry said with glee.

“I *did.* It was so *loud,* Harry. I wanted to die,” Hermione groaned, shaking her head.

Harry howled with laughter, drawing the attention of everyone around them. He ignored their sneers and stares, trembling through his shrieks even as Hermione sunk lower in her seat. He struggled to get control over his laughter. When it began to die down, Harry chanced a look over at Ron, sat across from Hannah and Neville. Ron was watching him and Hermione, his lips crooked into a grin. Harry broke down in tears again.

“Bugger off! You arse!” Hermione growled into his hands. Then, she looked at him through her fingers, looking all too terrified. “Did you ever fart in front of Riddle?”

Harry looked at her, smug. “No.”

Hermione was silent for a long moment.

“*Liar,*” she accused.

“He fucked me in the arse, Mione. Of course, he's heard me fart. He's seen his cum dribbling from my—"

“Too much,” Hermione snapped, pressing a finger against Harry’s lips. Harry smirked against her finger and leaned back in his chair, snorting to himself.

“What did he say?” Harry asked.

“He didn’t say *anything*. He just laughed at me. Really hard. He laughed at me until I ran and locked myself in the bathroom and threatened to hex him if he didn’t leave,” Hermione said sharply, looking rather ashamed of herself. “My parents would disown me if they knew.”

“Oh my God, why would your parents care about your sex life?” Harry asked, looking both horrified and fascinated.

Almost ashamed, Hermione sighed. “My parents are very concerned about me having a healthy sex life and not being ashamed of my bodily functions. They led by example.”

“...what kind of example?”

“We have a painting of my mum’s vagina in our sitting room. It’s very tasteful, though. Georgia O’Keeffe-esque,” Hermione blurted out. “It represents the beauty and the power of the female form.”

“Okay, now I know why you are the way you are,” Harry snorted.

Hermione flipped the bird.

“My mum would also be upset that *I* wasn’t asking him. But, I just farted on him, so I don’t *want* to,” Hermione groaned.

Harry snorted again. “Tom’s going with Lovegood.”

“Lovegood?” Hermione demanded, jumping on the subject change.

“Yeah. She asked. I don’t think she’s interested. She winked at me. But, it wasn’t a…‘*oooh,* competition’ wink. It was a ‘*oooh,* doing this for you’ wink.”

“What does that even mean?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ll just go alone. I don’t need a man.”

“Historically, that’s untrue,” Hermione said snidely.

Harry’s mouth dropped open, and he floundered.

“Well, you farted on your boyfriend.”

Hermione punched him in the shoulder.

DIAGNOSIS

“He’s in the final stages. He’s going to die. Today,” Harry said, his voice cold and sharp. If that motivated Tom, it didn’t show. Instead, the man continued to stare at the enormous

drawing of Ernie Macmillan's lungs, the tip of his wand tracing over Harry's rudimentary work.

"The roots are going to either puncture the tissue or travel up his trachea," Tom murmured quietly. He tilted his head and then took a step back, a bewildering look in his eyes. He looked more alive than he had in days. "There's no chance of the girlfriend loving him and even if she did, it wouldn't matter. The flowers would die, but getting them out...he'd have to let them naturally pass. The stress would make his body give out."

"Another impossible case," Harry said, exhaustion in every line of his body.

"Another impossible case," Tom repeated. He paused as he looked over at Harry and reached over, squeezing his bicep. Harry looked up, surprised. "We do what we must. It's beautiful today."

"It is," Harry said softly, leaning into Tom's touch. "I'm angry at her. Leanne."

"It's not your place to be angry," Tom said, his voice far softer than Harry had any right to hear.

"I know. Astoria told me," Harry said.

Tom smirked. "*I* know. Astoria told *me*."

"So, she *is* a rat. I knew she was going to report me," Harry grumbled under his breath, though a spark of amusement twisted his lips into the tiniest of smiles.

"Is it really 'reporting' you if she told *me*?" Tom asked. "You didn't kill anyone or compromise the study. I don't care."

"I know you don't. You're an asshole who doesn't care about anyone's feelings," Harry said, letting out a laugh that sounded only slightly wooden. Tom stared at him, his burgundy gaze suddenly serious.

"I care about yours."

Harry felt his cheeks burn and he looked away. "Yeah, okay. What do we do?" Harry asked, biting his bottom lip. "And no more throwing around Killing Curses so easily."

"Are you...upset about that? The fact that I can cast one?" Tom asked curiously.

"I think it's weird. For a Healer to be able to use such Dark magic so easily," Harry said instead. "But, you knew that I thought it was weird. The concept of this entire project is *weird.* Dark magic to Heal. But, I knew what I signed up for."

"You didn't sign up for me throwing Killing Curse," Tom said pointedly. Harry hummed but didn't give a straight answer. Tom pulled Harry in front of him so that they were both facing the bored. Harry squirmed when he felt Tom's hand tighten on his elbow, and the man's chin against the top of his head for just a moment. "No more Killing Curses. What do you know about Amortentia?"

“It’s colloquially called the most dangerous potion in the world,” Harry said with a shrug. He paused when he felt Tom stiffen. “I know your mother used it on your father. Why?”

Tom pulled away from him suddenly, walking up to the outline of Ernie Macmillan’s respiratory system, tracing the lines that represented the roots of flowers. “A powerful potion and a powerful disease based upon manipulating the same neurotransmitters, the chemical compounds that form love, meet. What happens?”

“What?” Harry asked blankly.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Did you ever take Alchemy?” he asked.

"Uh, my mother's specialty? No," Harry said, his lips curled back in disgust. "I took Arithmancy. I don't even...*know* what Alchemy is.”

“Alchemy is a branch of magic in which we transmute base metals into noble metals. It’s broad but true. Alchemy, at its *core,* is about balance. Amortentia is an interesting potion in that it's based, not in any type of natural water but, in *rose* water. Roses are powerful symbols of love. A powerful potion of ‘love’ meets a powerful disease based upon manipulating the same neurotransmitters meet. What happens?” Tom asked again.

Harry leaned forward, eyes wide.

“The reaction is neutralized,” Harry spat out excitedly. Tom smirked in approval. Harry deflated then. “Okay, so assuming we neutralize everything without him dying: how much Amortentia do we use, how do we administer it, and how do we make sure the flowers pass without his body giving out due to stress?”

Tom hummed. “His body is already under stress from the disease, then dealing with the Amortentia. A trance. We’ll have a Mind Healer but him into a trance. It’s unlike a magical coma. If we put him into a magical sedation, his mind can still process the pain. But, a trance calms the mind. It stills *everything*. Then, we will physically remove it.”

“Risky, risky,” Harry hummed, tapping his chin. “Of course, that’s on the assumption that we can even use Amortentia to treat him.”

“The other option is a painful death since we’re not doing Killing Curses anymore,” Tom said with a shrug. Harry nodded, staring at the diagram for a long moment. He looked at Tom, a sad exhausted look in his eyes.

“Love is painful,” he said softly.

Tom’s eyes darkened. “It is.”

They stared at one another for a long moment. It was at the moment that Harry realized how close they were. Harry took a step back, shaking his head.

“I’ll go get the Amortentia. A full cauldron, to be safe.”

“I’ll fetch Matron Strout and the patient.”

Their words rammed into one another, cutting the tension between them. Harry stumbled back, never tearing his eyes away from the man's form before he left the office and practically ran towards the lift. His heart was beating out of his chest, and he swallowed down all of the dread and worry that stirred in his belly. The scent of pollen and flowers lingered in the air.

Merlin, Harry *hated* flowers.

He stepped into the lift, ignoring the matrons and patients and patients' families. There was a couple crying in the corner, weeping softly to one another, clutching a stuffed toy in their hands. Harry absently wondered if Astoria had been the one to tell them their child died. From something inane probably. Harry had once had the idea that he'd save everyone; that he'd never have to tell anyone that their child, their love, their *person* died in his care.

This profession—if it can—will burn the heart right out of you because when you're faced with death like this...your heart becomes a problem.

Lily's words echoed in his head like a war drum. You're too emotional, Astoria had said. Astoria had been right, though Harry hated to admit it. He sighed as he exited on the very ground floor, going towards the pharmacy, and he frowned when he saw Zacharias Smith sitting behind the counter, appearing very put out and very bored.

Harry cleared his throat and Smith straightened, eyes wide.

"I *volunteered* for this, you know," Smith drawled, pompously. He was all self-importance and bravado, a smarmy layer of handsomeness hiding all that ugly underneath. "There wasn't anyone to cover this shift and the greenhouse was crowded."

"There are, like, three greenhouses," Harry said.

"Four," Smith retorted, quickly. Harry smirked.

"I wouldn't know," Harry drawled. "I'm usually in a theatre."

"Yeah, because you're fucking your teacher," Smith barked back.

Harry hummed. "Not even I'm good enough at taking dick to get into a theatre I don't deserve to be in, Smith," he said, demurely, tossing Smith the bird. Smith looked absolutely *scandalized*. "I need Amortentia. A whole cauldron-full."

"What? Does Riddle no longer want to fuck your used arse—"

"Enough," Harry said coldly, wand pressed to Smith's sternum. Smith looked shocked that Harry had even drawn his wand. "I'll take a lot of shit, Smith. I *have* taken a lot of shit. But, if you finish that sentence—especially on a day like this—I will *end* you. A cauldron of Amortentia. Now. The key to the restricted section is in the second drawer. Go."

Smith did as he was told quite quickly, fetching the big brass ring with a single key hanging from it. He scurried into the back, the rattling cage door sliding open as he went into the section that held particularly addictive and dangerous potions. It was only a few minutes until

he came back with a copper cauldron, covered by a plastic top, nested in a basket. Harry held out his hand and Smith held it just out of reach.

“This is in the restricted section. I need handwritten permission from your supervis—”

“Smith. Not the time *and* that’s not a rule,” Harry snarled, taking the basket. “I’m not a patient filling out a prescription. I’m treating a patient.”

Smith looked surprised. “I thought you were weaning a patient off of...wait, how are you using Amortentia? Tell me!”

Harry rolled his eyes and kept walking, ignoring Smith's questions. He decided against the lift, instead electing to walk down the last flight of stairs to the magical theatres and walking to Tom's customary one. Harry frowned when he saw Leanne standing by the doors that restricted access to anyone that wasn't a Healer. She looked up at him, wide-eyed, before glancing back down at the basket.

“Is that...smells like Ernie’s cologne,” Leanne said softly. Almost thoughtfully.

“We’ll do all that we can,” Harry said instead as he walked through the doors and into Tom’s preferred magical theatre.

Matron Miriam Strout was already in the room, standing at attention with the same dignity she always possessed. Tom was pacing, dragonhide gloves already on, staring down at Ernie Macmillan with a frown. He huffed and stopped, turning to face Harry.

“We’re going to put the Amortentia is direct contact with the flowers. Internal. Do you know the respiratory system?” Tom asked.

Harry scoffed. “Yes. Sounds like a plan. But, are we cutting into the lungs to get contact?”

“No. We’ll fill the cavity and make an incision in his trachea fill from the inside. Then, we’ll siphon it back out after it reacts,” Tom said. Harry couldn’t help but smile as he set the basket down on the levitating slab of stone next to the other instruments. Tom raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You sound so confident. Like your bullshit is fact. As if your theory isn’t just a theory. As if our patient isn’t going to die,” Harry said, bitter and still smiling.

Strout snorted.

“People die,” Tom said softly. “You told me that we always have to try. It’s our job to save our patients. And if we can’t, we try. Extreme measures.”

Harry’s smile brightened slightly. “Extreme measures,” he confirmed gently.

Tom nodded and cleared his throat. He raised his wand. “It’s a beautiful day to conquer death. Let’s have some fun,” Tom said carefully. He cracked his knuckles and began. “First, we’ll crack his chest. Once we do this, the shock might send him into cardiac arrest. If that occurs, you will administer a shock directly to his heart. After he’s stable, you will make an incision

in his neck. From there, you will pour the Amortentia at the same time. Matron Strout is here to assist if we need it."

As Tom spoke, he cracked Ernie's chest, revealing bone and blood and flowers. The spiny roots of the flowers had pierced the walls of the lungs, twined around the bones of his ribcage, crawling up his spine and surrounding his heart a nestle of blossoms and roots. Harry winced as he looked at the horrifying beauty of it all. And even still, Ernie didn't die. His lungs twitched, expanding and contracting. When his lungs contracted, Harry saw the shadows of primroses and rue.

"Beautiful," Tom whispered.

"Terrifying," Harry corrected.

Tom looked up, burgundy eyes flashing. "'Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it'," Tom quoted gently. And then, he went for the Amortentia, pausing over it, taking in the scent. "What do you smell?"

"Treacle tart, the sterile smell of a hospital bed, and...you," Harry said softly.

Tom hummed. "Make the incision. Insert a tube into the incision so that we can administer the Amortentia at the same time."

Harry did as commanded, quickly using his wand to cut into Ernie's throat. Blood spilled immediately as he made the incision deep enough to reach the windpipe but not enough to sever it.

"*Tergeo*," he murmured, siphoning away the excess blood as he reached for the silver tube on the tray of delicate instruments. Slowly, he slid it in, securing it in place with magic. "No obstructions going down but, I don't know how far the stems travel up the bronchi. If they reached the trachea yet."

"If they haven't, we have a chance of being successful. If they have, he's going to die," Tom said carefully.

"He's strong," Harry said firmly. "He's lived this long."

"With luck. His luck might have just run out," Tom murmured. He took another of the delicate silver instruments, a ladle, and ladled out the Amortentia. "I'll now administer it into the pulmonary sac. You will pour it down the trachea. Let's see what happens. The rose water *will* have an effect."

Harry grabbed a ladleful of the potion. As soon as he touched it with the ladle, the scent wafted up to him, temporarily stupefying him before he shook it off. He held it over the small pipe carefully and looked at Tom. Tom nodded once and Harry winced as he began to pour the Amortentia down the pipe.

The reaction was instantaneous.

Immediately, the roots began to contract, shriveling and writhing around the man's lungs, as if trying to keep a tight enough hold. Some of the roots withered, turning into nothingness, but others grew, snaking around his ribs and tightening enough to crack them.

"What the *fuck*?" Harry hissed.

Tom winced. "The reaction is...the opposite of what I thought it would be."

"You *think*?" Harry snarled. He pulled his wand and pointed it at his chest. "He's open already. Let me take it *out.*"

"He specifically said not to," Tom warned.

"He also specifically said that he'd like to *live*," Harry retorted.

Tom shook his head. "He said extreme measures *except* for removing the plants. We can't remove the plants unless they *die.* You take them out while they're living and the neurotransmitters that cause love will be damaged. Magically. There's no coming back from that," Tom warned. "So, it either dies on its own or he dies. Right now."

Harry shook his head, crossing his arms as he watched the Hanahaki Disease fight to survive. His chest ached with the urge to do *something*, but he knew legally he couldn't. He let out a choking sound, pressing his hand over his eyes as the roots crawled closer to Ernie's heart.

"Look Death in the eye, Harry Potter," Tom barked. Harry jerked, looking up at him, wide-eyed. Tom's eyes were blank. "Are you afraid of death?"

"Are you?" Harry whispered back.

Tom didn't answer, his eyes fixed on Ernie's body as the roots finally wrapped around Ernie's heart and contracted. Ernie's heart beat weakly. Once. Twice. And then nothing. Harry felt his own heart stop too.

"Call it," Tom said, his voice cold.

"*Tempus*," Harry said, voice just as harsh. "Time of death. 6:27 PM."

Tom's eyes softened. "Matron Strout, if you would give us a moment," Tom said, his eyes never leaving Harry's face. Harry looked away, burying his face in his hands as he let out a roar of frustration. Miriam didn't have to be asked twice as she exited the room, her expression still impassive. Tom crept closer to Harry, walking around the floating slab. He grabbed Harry's wrists, pulling his hands from his face. "People die."

"I *know,*" Harry rasped. "I'm just so tired of not being able to save them. We're supposed to save them. That's our job."

"Sometimes, we can't, love," Tom said gently. He reached up, tilting Harry's chin up, pressing his lips against Harry's forehead, breathing in the scent of his hair.

"He died, thinking he was unloved and lonely," Harry rasped.

“You’re so emotional,” Tom said, and he sounded fond now. “Do you know what I smell, love?”

“What?” Harry muttered, letting his forehead fall against Tom’s sternum.

Tom’s hand came up to his head, combing his fingers through Harry’s thick hair. “The smell of a magical theatre after a successful surgery, ink, and *you*.”

Harry was quiet for a long moment.

“I’m going to prepare Ernie’s body so that Leanne and his family can see it. I’ll Firecall them from the little fireplace between theatre 3 and 4,” Harry said quietly.

“I’ll speak with Leanne,” Tom murmured, nodding.

They separated and Tom looked at Harry one more time. Harry was *beautiful*, even in all his grief and frustration. Tom pulled away and left the room, gathering the vulnerable bits of himself that he had let slip, and donning a mask of professional porcelain once more. As he walked the corridor into the main hall of the floor, he reassembled himself. He pushed the double doors open and he looked down and to his left, at the girl curled up into one of the chairs against the wall.

Leanne was half-asleep, but the moment the doors banged open, she was alert. She took one look at Tom and crumpled.

“Miss, when Mr. Macmillan got here, we both knew that he was in the final stages of Hanahaki Disease. In an experimental treatment, we administered Amortentia as a way of counteracting and neutralizing the disease. Do to how experimental it was and our short time frame, we did not achieve the full results that we wanted, and he succumbed to his injuries by way of roots strangling his heart. We did everything we could. We are sorry for your loss,” Tom said as succinctly as possible. He waited for the tears. They almost always came. A lot of terrible, heaving sobs and cracking, choking sounds. Sometimes, they tried to drape themselves over him, soaking him in salt and grief.

It didn’t come. Leanne looked empty as she collapsed back in her seat.

“Would you please sit with me?” she said, softly. Tom’s eyes widened and he raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know if it’s against...policy. But, I have to Firecall his mum and dad, but I don’t think I can stand right now.”

“I can,” Tom decided and he sat down on one side of her, looking at her plainly. “Do you have any questions for me?”

Leanne nodded. “Was he in pain? He was in so much pain by the end.”

“I have no reason to believe that he died in pain. He was heavily sedated,” Tom said.

“Good. Good,” Leanne whispered. “Did you remove the flowers?”

“He specifically said not to.”

“He was a sentimental idiot. He always has been. Since we were kids. Before Hogwarts even,” Leanne said gently. She let out a terrible coughing sound. Tom suddenly decided that he liked Leanne. She didn’t seem the type to cry. “If you *had* removed it, would he have lived?”

“I can’t speak in definitives, but most likely no. His lungs would have been severely scarred. They would’ve operated at 50% capacity. He would have struggled with basic physical activity. It wouldn’t have been a fulfilling life,” Tom said. “But, these are hypotheticals as we never entertained the idea. He died as he wanted to.”

Lies.

Leanne’s face *crumpled.*

“Why couldn’t I love him like he should have been?” she snarled. “I...I *tried.* I *did.* I *tried.* I cared *so* much. And it just wouldn’t...it just couldn’t…”

“You can’t make yourself love someone. That’s not how it works,” Tom said calmly, staring at the ceiling.

“But, it’s not *fair*,” Leanne said, her voice scraping the air.

“Life seldom is.”

They sat in silence for a time, simply staring at the ceiling together. The only sound that could be heard was their breathing.

“Leanne.”

Both Tom and Leanne looked away from the ceiling. Tom raised an eyebrow at Harry, but Harry wasn’t even looking at him. Instead, he stared at Leanne with a strange intensity in his bright green eyes. Merlin, he was lovely, even when trying to hide his grief. Harry’s hands tightened around the bundle in his arms before he kneeled in front of Leanne and offered it to her.

It was a bouquet of primroses and daffodils, dappled with rue.

“W-what’s…” Leanne trailed off.

“In dealing with the...aftermath of Hanahaki Disease, it is customary to cut out the bouquet and arrange it for the Beloved. I think that Ernie would’ve wanted you to have it,” Harry said gently. He straightened up, smoothing down his robes as he looked at her. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Leanne looked at him, helplessly, clutching the bouquet tighter in her lap. “I...I...his parents…” Leanne rasped.

“They’re on their way,” Harry said quietly. Tom raised an eyebrow. “I Firecalled them. They knew what to expect. They’ll be waiting for you in the lobby. They’re worried.”

Leanne nodded, lost. “Thank you. Both of you,” she said, looking between them.

Tom glanced at Harry and Harry held his gaze, firm and he nodded.

Tom looked back at Leanne. "We tried, but Mr. Macmillan was slated to die. So, we did what we could. He was allowed to die with dignity."

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione stopped in the doorway to the trainee changing room. Quickly, she debated turning on her heel and simply Apparating to Grimmauld Place in her work robes. They needed a wash anyway and a Cleaning Charm wasn’t going to cut it anymore. She was beginning to smell like both the cold sterility that belonged only in a hospital, blood, and treacle tart. It wouldn’t do.

But, she hated leaving in her work robes. It made her feel uncomfortable, and Ron was trying to convince her that she actually needed to take a break from work sometimes. Divorce herself from the one thing that Hermione was letting define her.

And there was the problem: Ron.

He grinned at her from his perch right in front of her cupboard.

“Can’t escape me now, can you?” Ron teased. Hermione pushed past him, pretending that she didn’t see him. Ron huffed out a small laugh and grabbed her wrists, slowly tugging her around to look at him. “Don’t tell me you’re still embarrassed.”

“Well, you’ve been laughing at me all day, so…” Hermione muttered under her breath.

“Because it was *funny.* Come on, you hag. Don’t tell me it *bothered* you,” Ron said with a smile. His smile faltered when he saw the very serious look on Hermione’s face. “You’re still beautiful.”

“Oh, screw beautiful,” Hermione snapped. “I’m brilliant. If you want to appease me, praise my brain.”

Ron laughed quietly. “I didn’t know you needed to be reminded of your brilliance,” he said gently. He brushed a stray curl back from her face and quietly celebrated that she no longer flinched from his fingers in her hair. Hermione’s hair was a very touchy subject for her. It required a lot of upkeep and she didn’t appreciate him frizzing up her curl pattern even on her best days. “Hey. *Hey,* why did it bother you? It’s not a big deal.”

“It *was,*” Hermione said stubbornly.

“It’s *not.* It happens. You’re human. I don’t know if you were trying to pretend that you aren’t, but you *are*. That’s *very* obvious,” Ron said, ribbing gently. He leaned down, pressing

a quick kiss to her cheekbone and he smiled when he felt Hermione's lips twitch against his skin.

"Okay," Hermione sighed. She pulled back, leaning against her cupboard. "You make me feel very stupid sometimes, Ron Weasley. And weak. It's...disconcerting."

Ron laughed softly and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "If it'll make you feel better, I'll fart in bed tonight. Mine will be *particularly* rank."

Hermione's nose wrinkled.

"Ugh, please don't."

"I'm going to do it," Ron laughed.

Hermione hummed. "So, you weren't...freaked out? By the...the-thing-that-shall-not-be-named?" Hermione asked gravely.

"Nope."

"Then, why haven't you asked me to the fundraiser?" Hermione demanded. Quickly, she amended, "Not that I need you to ask me. I can decide to ask you by myself or go alone or whatever. But, you just laughed me all day."

Ron rolled his eyes. "First: you *avoided* me all day. You literally sat at a different table at lunch. Second: I just assumed that we were going together."

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Never assume *anything* with me, Ron Weasley. I'll go out of my way to surprise you."

Harry sauntered in as Ron leaned down to press another kiss to Hermione's mouth. He grinned.

"Oh, so she got over her fart?" Harry teased with a low hiss.

"Shut the fuck up," Hermione snapped before she pulled Ron back down for another kiss.

Harry laughed briefly before his expression fell, pushing past them to his cupboard. He brushed his hair back over from his forehead, sighing. He'd gotten emotional. Too emotional. Tom was giving him too many passes. But, Harry pushed that all out of his mind. His shift was over. For now. He had to change and go home and potentially order fish and chips. When he opened them, he scowled at the flowers that sat there.

New ones. These flowers were bright, cheery yellow sunflowers, big and wide. Baby pink roses were entwined in the bouquet. Harry hated flowers now.

Hermione sneezed obnoxiously again, groaning in irritation.

“Don’t bring those home. They’re going to make me have an allergy attack,” Hermione condemned, her nose wrinkling. Her limbs were still entwined with Ron’s.

“We’ll pick you up an Allergy Elixir from the pharmacy,” Ron said easily.

Harry snorted. “Don’t bother. *Evanesco.*”

The bouquet of flowers Vanished into nothingness, leaving only the note that Harry wouldn’t bother reading. He wasn’t interested in being wooed. At that point the day, Harry didn’t think he even *believed* in love anymore. Well...that was maybe a little dramatic of him, and yet.

“That was...harsh,” Neville said hesitantly.

Harry shrugged, not even bothering to respond as he changed.

“What’s going on with him?” Hannah asked Neville unabashedly.

Harry’s eye twitched. He hated when people talked about him and not to him. He wrestled out of his neon green robes, tossing them into his cupboard. Harry pulled his tee-shirt over his head and slammed the cupboard shut, head held high.

“Leave it alone,” Neville warned.

Hannah frowned. “You’re being rather childish aren’t you, Ha—well, I never!”

Harry smirked as he shoved his middle finger in her face on his way out of the trainee changing room. He wasn’t really looking where he was going when someone called out in a low voice, “Harry Potter. The pleasure is mine.”

Harry paused, turning to look at the man with a single raised eyebrow.

“Blaise Zabini. The pleasure *is* yours.”

Zabini looked fucking *delighted.*

“You got my flowers?” Zabini asked.

Harry's eyes narrowed at the man. He was tall. Handsome. So damn self-assured. He really had a type. It was a little embarrassing. Harry tilted his head, taking a step closer. Zabini looked surprised. He was used to being the predator. Harry was never *anyone’s* prey.

“I Vanished them. They were fucking with my friend’s allergies,” Harry said coolly.

Zabini twitched, but otherwise, didn’t react either way. He continued that self-assured smiling and Merlin, Harry wasn’t sure if he wanted to punch the man in the throat or ride him off into the sunset.

“Well, then, I’ll have to endeavor to get you something a little more hypoallergenic,” Zabini said carefully. Harry hummed, looking down at his nails. Slowly, he looked up at Zabini. He

raised an eyebrow, waiting for Zabini to continue. Zabini nearly floundered. “I admit, that I am not here for any other reason but you.”

“Well, besides the fact that you’re a Board member, correct?” Harry asked with a long yawn.

Zabini swallowed. “You’re very beautiful, Healer Potter.”

“I know.” Bored, Harry turned on his heel and went to grab his bag and go home for the day. Zabini was *boring, boring, boring.* Harry didn’t think he’d ever find a man that was more interesting than Tom Riddle.

“Don’t walk away from me.” Zabini’s hand clamped around his wrist.

Harry spun around, wand already out, and Zabini threw his hands up, eyes wide. Harry lifted his chin, taking a step forward.

“Don’t grab me,” Harry warned. He couldn’t fight the small smile that was working its way across his face.

“Your reflexes are fast. Like an Auror.”

“My father’s Head Auror,” Harry said carefully. “He’s been tapped to ascend to Head of the DMLE any day now.”

“You have impressive lineage,” Zabini said. He shook his head and amended his words. "*You* are impressive.”

“Mhmm. What do you want, Mr. Zabini?” Harry asked.

“Please. Call me Blaise.”

“Okay. Mr. Zabini,” Harry said shortly.

Zabini looked both turned on and exasperated. “I wanted to...I don’t know.”

“You want to escort me to the fundraiser,” Harry said. He didn’t say it like a guess. Slowly, he stowed his wand away as Zabini nodded in agreement.

“Would you be amenable to that?”

Harry pretended to think about it. Zabini looked nearly *nervous.* Oh, how Harry had missed his *games.*

Harry grinned. “I suppose. Don’t pick me up. I’ll meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, y'all. It's your girl.

I hope you liked this chapter. It's twice as long as the last one to make up for my month-long absence. Next chapter is gonna be SO fun. Like it's gonna blow some of your tiny minds. I know it blew my mind when I concocted it in my brain.

Finally, how would y'all feel about a political intrigue House of Cards/Scandal/West Wing-type Tomarry fic after this one? Because I'm REALLY feeling it. Like really I want to know if you guys would read it because I don't want to write something no one will read, you feel? But, also please tell me you'll read it, because I really REALLY wanna write it.

Anyway, leave your thoughts!

CITATIONS:

Lovesickness (mentioned):
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/157252433386/lovesickness-caused-by-an-overdose-on-love

Spectre (previously mentioned):
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/143812628894/spectres-or-incomplete-vampires-spectres-are

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"OW! FUCK!"

"What is it?" Harry shouted as he stumbled into Hermione's room, attempting to do up the millions of tiny buttons that went up the front of his bottle green dress robes. He ignored Ron as the man fiddled with his new dress robes—a far cry from lacy, frilly mess that his mum had owled him after hearing about the fundraiser.

Hermione was kneeling on the ground, crumpling her dress as she stared in the long floor mirror, rubbing at one of her eyes.

"I fucking poked myself in the eye with this eyeliner. Why the fuck did I let Hannah convince me I needed this?" Hermione snarled. She looked ready to Banish the eyeliner far away, never to be heard from again. Harry grinned. He fell to his knees before her and her nose wrinkled when she saw his bare chest. "Button your dress robes."

"Too many buttons. Can't do it with my wand though," Harry said with a shrug. "Now close your eyes and relax. I'll do your eyeliner."

"I'll do up your robes," Hermione responded in kind. She waved her wand and Harry shifted as he felt her magic tickle up the front of his dress robes, pulling the buttons into the holes all the way up to his collar. And then, Hermione settled on her haunches, closing her eyes patiently. She fiddled with her wand in her lap.

"Why do you know how to do eyeliner?" Ron asked as she posed in the other mirror, admiring his midnight blue robes that actually looked quite nice with his red hair and perfectly complemented Hermione's periwinkle robes.

"I'm a deep well," Harry said in kind.

Hermione snorted. "Yeah, okay."

"Bet he just wore eyeliner during his partying days," Neville said from the doorway, grinning at the rest of the housemates. "Come on, now. The Portkey is going to go off in about twenty minutes."

"Do we pre-game for this type of thing?" Ron asked.

"How uncouth," Hermione squawked.

"Was that a 'yes' or 'no'?" Ron asked blankly.

Harry frowned. "Hermione, you can yell at him after I finish your eyeliner. You're going to make the line crooked and it needs to be right on your lash line. Ron, stop being a berk. It's

clearly way too classy for that."

"There'll be a bar, though, right? I *cannot* be stuck at a table with Greengrass and Malfoy and Smith and Patil and Abbott—"

"That's my girlfriend!" Neville protested. "And my friend. Astoria that is. No one else. But, yeah, that's my girlfriend!"

Hermione hummed. "She's a bit much, Neville. Hannah's alright, but if she talks to me one more time about being a better girlfriend, I might have to kill her," Hermione said.

Immediately, Harry supplied, "I'd help you hide the body. My dad's an Auror. I know how to get away with that stuff."

"Merlin, aren't you a Healer? Do no harm," Neville teased.

Harry finished off one gorgeous wing and then looked over at Neville, his expression serious. "She's my person."

"What does that even mean?" Ron asked curiously.

"If I murdered someone," Hermione began, quite primly, "he's the person I'd call to help me drag the corpse across the living room floor."

"You guys are morbid freaks," Neville declared, shaking his head. He couldn't hide his smile, even if he wanted to. Harry turned back to Hermione and continued on her second eye, brushing the eyeliner gently across her lash line.

"You love us anyway," Harry sang.

"Don't know why," Ron teased with a grin. He sighed as he felt his stomach grumble. "I'm so hungry. Do you think the food will be good?"

"It's at *Versailles*. Of *course*, it'll be good. And don't you think Lily Evans would have sprung for food to match," Hermione declared just as Harry finished her second wing. She stood up and held out her hand pulling Harry up to his feet too. They admired each other in the mirror, humming as they primped. "I look fine, right?"

"You're not going to do a lip?" Harry asked.

Hermione scowled. "No. I've put enough effort into my appearance. Eyeliner and I even straightened my *hair*. Do you know what my mum thinks about straightened hair? It's the result of systematic oppression and the pressure of white beauty."

"I like your curls better," Ron suggested.

Hermione snorted. "Don't care. But, I like them more too."

"Why aren't I allowed to say it?" Ron demanded as he joined Hermione in the mirror, gently bumping Harry out of the way. He reached up to brush on of her flyaways back into the

French knot that she had gelled and brushed her hair into.

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” Hermione teased. “I just said I didn’t care.”

She leaned up, pressing a kiss to his lips and Harry scowled playfully.

“Ew. Gross. I’m leaving.”

“Portkey leaves in 14,” Neville reminded him.

Harry shook his head with a grin. “My date is on the *Board*. I have a Portkey set for whenever I want to leave.”

“Fancy,” Hermione said, flatly. “Don’t forget about us little people when you’ve made it big.”

“I’ll never forget you,” Harry called, waving like a pageant girl. Ron cackled, flipping the bird at them. “But, I really have to meet Blaise. Or he’ll think I’ve stood him up.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry Portkeyed alone into the venue and would have stumbled if a strong hand hadn’t caught him by the shoulder and pushed him upright. Harry blinked up at Blaise Zabini owlishly and his lips pulled into a smile. Zabini cleaned up well—not that there had been much to clean in the first place. His brown face was classically handsome, teeth perfectly straight and white, and his hairline was impeccable. Harry looked over those broad shoulders, covered in heavy black and gold brocade. His dress robes looked like they cost all of Harry's yearly salary.

“Mr. Zabini,” Harry teased with a smile.

“Healer Potter, I thought I told you to call me Blaise,” Zabini chided.

“Blaise, then,” Harry corrected, wolfish and flirtatious. He leaned into Zabini’s hand for just a moment—six seconds to be exact, because Harry timed these things—before he stepped back, just out of reach. “I hope that you weren’t waiting too long for me.”

Zabini pulled out a luxurious pocket watch, the face surrounded by clusters of blood-red rubies and diamonds. "I've only been waiting for twenty-seven minutes."

“So, not long at all. I’m sure you’d wait for me for hours,” Harry teased.

“For just a moment of your time, Healer Potter, I’d wait an eternity,” Zabini said, just as smoothly.

Harry barked out a laugh. “You’re a quick talker, Blaise. I like that. Call me Harry,” Harry decided and Zabini looked as if he’d been given a gift.

“I come bearing gifts,” Zabini said. He waved his wand, Conjuring a classy boutonniere of white roses, bound by silk the same shade of bottle green as his dress robes. The pin that Zabini had in hand looked old and antique, decorated with diamonds and pearls.

Harry had never dated a *rich* man. Zabini could probably afford him the *best* take away.

What a lucrative relationship.

“It’s gorgeous! Put it on,” Harry commanded excitedly and Zabini leaned forward to fasten it to Harry’s lapel, his fingers lingering against Harry’s chest before he turned, offering his arm like the most perfect gentleman.

Harry had never dated a gentleman either. Interesting.

He wasn’t sure he liked it just yet.

“If I may,” Zabini said, offering his arm. Harry grinned as he latched on and they prepared to descend into the pit of vipers that were the upper crust of the wizarding world. Just as they took the first step, they heard a sharp crack and the pair turned to observe the newcomers.

Harry expected Hermione and Ron, *finally.*

That was not what he found.

His expression crumpled for only a second.

Luna and Tom looked stunning together. Luna's silvery dress robes wrapped around her middle, exposing bare arms, and a long string of stars spilled from her earlobes to her shoulders. Her blonde hair was piled high atop her head, dusted with silver glitter, matching silver streaked across her face. She was quite beautiful and alien in her dress.

Tom looked perfect in robes of velvet. They were a dark red, so dark that the robes were nearly black, and they looked striking in comparison to his burgundy eyes, his pale skin. His broad shoulders. His perfect cheekbones. And suddenly, when he looked at Harry with those fucking *eyes*, Harry was reminded of why he fell in love with the man all over again.

“Hello, Harry!” Luna cried out, practically tripping down the stairs to meet them. Tom moved much slower than her, each step purposeful, his gaze catching Harry in a trap. Luna reached up to stroke the petals of his boutonniere. Harry glanced at the beautiful corsage around her wrist. “You look great! Doesn’t he look great, Tom?”

Tom was there. Tom was right there and Harry *smelled* him. Like a fire and the rich sweetbitter taste of red wine on the back of his tongue.

"You look lovely, darling," Tom said as if each word hurt and meant a thousand different things.

Harry felt Blaise’s arm tense under his hand. “Thank you,” he said quietly. Carefully, he tore his gaze away from Tom. Still, he could feel the man’s eyes on him. He looked over at Luna and smiled. “You look great, Luna. You both look good. Together.”

He heard how stilted his words came out, and he winced. Forcibly, Harry took a step back, pressing him closer to Zabini's side. Zabini relaxed under his touch, but when Harry looked over at Zabini, the man's jaw was tight.

"And you are?" Tom asked, turning his bored gaze onto Zabini.

"We've met," Zabini said, his voice tight. "Blaise Zabini. I'm on the Board. You're Healer Riddle."

He didn't offer his hand.

"Pleasure," Tom drawled. And then, quite deliberately, he turned to Luna and offered his arm. "Drinks, Luna?"

"Of course. We'll see you in there, Harry. Mr. Zabini," Luna said.

Zabini nodded, his gaze softening. "Healer Lovegood."

The pair watched as Luna and Tom descended into the ballroom and disappeared. When they were out of sight, Harry realized then that he hadn't been breathing and relief washed over him. He looked up at Zabini and Zabini still looked stiff, watching where Tom had disappeared. Weakly, Harry elbowed him in the side and smiled up at him.

"Aren't you going to get me a drink, *Blaise?*" Harry teased with a smile.

Blaise blinked once, then twice, and finally, he gave that easy smile from before. "Of course, Harry. Let's go."

They descended into the den of high society wolves.

DIAGNOSIS

"This is the most extravagant thing I've ever been to in my life," Hermione muttered from the corner of her mouth. She looked up at Ron, uncertainty in his eyes, but he looked just as anxious as she did.

"Ditto," he whispered back. "What do we do first?"

"Free alcohol?" Neville suggested. "I think I see Hannah by the champagne table."

"When do they start serving the hard liquor? I'm going to need it, being surrounded by so much of the bourgeoisie," Hermione said as they descended the stairs into the ballroom. It really was the most extravagant place she'd ever seen.

Everyone was dressed to their finest. Even Dumbledore had dressed up in silver-blue robes, eye-catching neon yellow stars decorating the hem. He was swirling around the dance floor,

McGonagall in arm, and they were putting quite a few of the younger Healers to shame. Ron hid his grin in his hand as they walked past their bosses, making a straight beeline for the alcohol. Neville took Hannah by her hand and spun her, making the young woman giggle sweetly.

“You look amazing, Hannah,” Neville said, his ears already turning pink. Hannah beamed at him and leaned on her toes to press a quick, chaste kiss to Neville’s cheek.

Ron wondered absently if they had ever had actual *sex* because they were so sickeningly sweet, it seemed impossible. He made a note to himself to ask Neville if he’d ever just *fucked.* Hermione and he fucked all the time. They'd ‘made love' or whatever once or twice, but the fucking was great. Fucking did the job.

“You do, too,” Hannah giggled into Neville’s ear.

Ron glanced at Hermione from the corner and she rolled her eyes at him. Ron hid his grin.

Merlin, he loved this woman.

Oh. Love. *That* was a new thought.

“Neville!”

Hermione and Ron’s eyes widened in tandem as Astoria Greengrass rushed forward. Her enthusiasm looked misplaced on her typically emotionless face. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she grabbed Neville’s wrist, ignoring Hannah’s put out expression.

“Astoria, you look great,” Neville complimented lightly, ignoring the way Hannah’s jaw tightened.

“Thank you!” she said, running her fingers over the pale yellow skirts. “I do not have many opportunities to wear such beautiful dresses.”

“Aren’t you, like, high society? Like Malfoy?” Hannah asked with a sniff.

Astoria shrugged. “Not truly. I attended Beauxbatons, and though we had a Yule Ball, it wasn’t at *Versailles.* And I suppose that I am mostly...overjoyed, to be in my homeland," Astoria said, sounding nearly childlike. It made Ron smile somewhat. It made *Hermione* smile, who looked either grim or cross nearly all of the time.

Hannah’s gaze softened.

“I suppose that I would be too,” Hannah admitted.

Astoria leaned forward, probably to say something creepy because she couldn't help it.

“Hermione!”

Ron looked up, watching as Emmeline bounced across the room. Good God, she looked gorgeous with her perfect curls, and red lips, and even though Ron loved Hermione—whoa,

still new, still fucking *amazing*—he couldn't help but briefly admire Emmeline's cleavage. But, Em wasn't even looking at him, going determinedly for his girlfriend.

"Healer Vance?" Hermione asked with a frown. "Is there a patient—"

"No. No patient dying. Something *better,* actually," Emmeline said, waving her words away. She paused. "Oh, hello Ron."

"Hey, Em. You look good," Ron complimented. He preened when *his* girlfriend didn't get obscenely jealous right away because Hermione was a badass who was above that type of shit.

"Thanks," Emmeline said, distractedly pulling him into a side hug even as she stared at Hermione with a terrifying intensity. "Come, Hermione. We have work to do. These are our *peers*, and the editors of the International Journal of Magical Maladies, Creatures Quarterly, and the Annual Review is *here.*"

"Hua Tou Mei is *not* here," Hermione gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

Emmeline was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Who?" Neville asked.

Hermione turned on him, her eyes lit with savage ambition. "Only the premiere editor of the Annual Review. The Annual Review documents *all* new internal procedures. It's history-making. Lily Evans has only been published in it, *twice*," Hermione blurted out, shaking her head. "And she was already 6 years into her career when it happened."

Emmeline grabbed Hermione's hand. "*Apparently,* there's been talk, Hermione. Albus and Lily spoke with him about Lavender's procedure and he wants to speak to the two Healers that 'accomplished such an impressive feat'," Emmeline said, full of grandiose.

"Oh my God," Hermione gasped, already walking ahead of Emmeline, pulling her along.

"I thought...drinks?" Ron called after her.

Hermione turned, flipping the bird with a smile. "I'm about to become a legend, my dear."

"Okay. You go do that," Ron said because he would always cheer her on. He watched the pair of them disappear into the crowd, and slowly his smile fell. "Wow."

"What?" Neville asked.

"My girlfriend has just abandoned me for my almost-girlfriend," Ron sighed. "And her career."

"And now, you're alone," Astoria said with a smile.

Neville snorted. Ron had a lazy smile on his face and he shrugged.

“What can you do? Can’t stamp out brilliance. Also, I won a game of chess earlier with her, and I’m still feeling that residual glow.”

Astoria leaned forward. “Is that a...metaphor for sex?”

Neville groaned, shaking his head. “Come on, Astoria. Of course n—”

“It totally is,” Ron confirmed.

Neville smothered his shout of frustration with his hand.

DIAGNOSIS

“Merlin, I hate his perfect face and his perfect robes and his perfect *stupid* manners. What a bastard,” James sneered, glowering at Tom Riddle as the man walked through the ballroom with Luna Lovegood on his arm.

“His manners aren’t all that perfect,” Sirius interjected from across the table.

“Mind your business,” Remus chided, smacking his hand. Sirius pouted.

Lily rolled her eyes. “They aren’t. Riddle is a piece of work.”

“I just want to arrest him. He’s the worst. He must have done *something* illegal by now. Please tell me he’s, like, done Necromancy or something,” James pleaded, looking at Lily with puppy dog eyes. Lily rolled her eyes again, and sometimes, she felt that she rolled her eyes so much that they would fall out of her head. But, James pushed her to that.

“Necromancy is an imperfect magical art, and no one outside of the Department of Mysteries would even know how to go about it,” Lily said patiently.

“And didn’t you say he and Harry have some kind of special license from the Department of Mysteries? It’s why they can’t speak about the details of their study, right?” Remus asked.

“Mind your business,” James said, sticking out his tongue. Remus grinned and flipped him the bird. James folded his arms and let his head fell on them as he glared at Riddle. “I hate him. He touched my firstborn.”

“Only born,” Lavender interjected as she stuffed another deviled egg into her mouth.

“You were *born*. You were born of my dreams and stars and paperwork,” James protested.

Lavender rolled her eyes. She was far too like her mother.

“As I’ve been reminded, Harry is an adult. We aren’t to interfere in his romantic affairs. No matter how distasteful we find his choices,” Lily said, reciting exactly what her Mind Healer

always told her. James frowned.

“Why won’t you let me challenge him to a duel?” James demanded. “You’re no fun.”

Lily hummed thoughtfully. “I actually don’t know if you can take Riddle.”

“I’m the head Auror!” James snapped.

“Yes. But, he’s very well-versed in Dark magic, James. Too well-versed. If he wanted to be a Dark Lord, I think he has the drama, gravitas, and skills to be one,” Lily said conversationally. “And I went over budget for this venue and, I signed the security deposit in our name. I’d like my security deposit back after this.”

James huffed. “He made our child a spectacle. Humiliated him. Made him feel belittled. He deserves to pay.”

“Riddle doesn’t respond to outright threats,” Lily said. “I find that the best offense is passive-aggressiveness and condescension. Destroy him with a *smile*.”

“You’re both equally horrifying and terrifying,” Lavender said, shaking her head. Then, she leaned back in her seat, attempting to casually take a swig of Lily’s champagne before Lily carefully plucked it from her fingers and finished it off. “Harry is a grown man. Let him do what he wants. Make his own mistakes.”

“He’s our *kid*,” James insisted, shaking his head. “I say we *destroy* Riddle, my love.”

"I concur," Lily said with a fond smile, reaching over to take James' hand in her own, stroking his knuckles with her thumb.

Lavender huffed. “You’re both insane,” Lavender said snippily. She prepared to berate them again, but her breath caught in her throat as she watched her brother and his companion approach. She bit her bottom lip, shivering gently. “Harry. Harry’s...friend.”

Lily raised a single eyebrow and she stood, leaning forward to press a kiss to the top of Harry’s head. “Hello, Harry.”

Harry frowned.

“I hate how tall you are,” Harry grumbled. “You don’t *need* to wear heels too.”

“ ‘Hello, Mum. How are you? Good? Great. I’m fine too’,” Lily mocked, unimpressed. Harry glared back at her, rolling his eyes. Lily’s lips curled into a careful smile and she shook her head, wrapping her arms around Harry and hugging him tightly. Harry’s eyes widened at the easy affection. “My Mind Healer says that there are five ways of expressing and experiencing love. Physical touch is a love language that I’m working on becoming…fluent in.”

“Merlin,” Harry’s friend said, muffling a smile.

“A new...friend?” Sirius asked, teasingly. “At least, he’s your age. You do like them tall, don’t you?”

Harry sputtered and Harry's friend flushed to his ears, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Bloody hell, I wouldn't date Harry if you paid me," Harry's friend blurted out. "He's very messy, isn't he?"

"Wow, fuck off," Harry laughed. "No. This is one of my housemates. This is Ron Weasley."

"I know your father!" James said, reaching out his hand to shake. "We've never met Harry's friends before. Ron Weasley. You *exist*."

"Did you think I didn't have friends?" Harry squawked.

"Well, we were worried," Remus admitted weakly.

Harry shook his head, dramatically clutching his hand to his chest. "Et tu, Remus?"

"Okay, Shakespeare," Lily said, rolling her eyes as she settled into her chair. She waved her hand to one of the empty chairs and Harry and his friend *Ron* settled down. Lavender licked her lips, looking up that tall, skinny beanpole and decided she wanted to climb it. She glanced over at Harry, and he was staring at her, amused.

"Lavender. This is my friend, Ron. Hermione's boyfriend," Harry said pointedly.

Lavender scoffed. "I can take her."

"You really shouldn't," Harry warned. "Don't be like your big brother."

"I've always admired you," Lavender retorted immediately. "Hello, *Ron*. I'm Lavender."

Ron's eyes widened as it slowly dawned on him what they were talking about. His cheeks turned a bright red and he looked around at the other adults, searching for help. Lily was staring at him blankly. Sirius, James, and Remus were attempting to smother their laughter.

"You're...you're so young," Ron squeaked.

Lavender crossed her legs, carefully arching her back just so.

"Am I?" Lavender asked.

"Is it weird that I want to see my little sister fight my person? Who would win, Mum? Lavender or Hermione?" Harry cackled.

"Hermione is formidable," Lily considered.

Lavender's eyes flashed and she bared her teeth. "I'm practically a werewolf," she boasted. Then, she winked at Ron. "Woof."

Sirius and James exploded in a round of loud, obnoxious howls. Remus snorted, shaking his head.

"*I'm* a werewolf. You're...werewolf-adjacent," Remus said. "You like your meat rare and you get twitchy when the full moon comes around. Like getting a period."

"Harry…" Ron whined. "You're not the weirdest one in your family?"

Harry snorted. "Not by a long shot. I used to think I was the fucked up one, but going to family dinner has made me realize that they're all freaks."

"Freaks beget freaks," Lily said in that strange detached voice that reminded Ron of Astoria.

"I...think I'm going to find, Hermione," Ron said, anxiously standing.

Harry shook his head. "Aww, Ron. Don't bitch out yet!"

But, Ron was already scurrying away, cringing from the lascivious way Lavender licked her lips.

"Bye, Harry…Harry's family…"

"Bye, Won-Won," Lavender cooed.

James and Sirius continued to shriek like a pair of banshees.

"Come on, Lavender. Stop making my friends uncomfortable," Harry laughed.

Lavender flipped him the bird. "No. It's payback for when you used to flirt with all the guys I had crushes on. Fuck off."

Harry grinned. "I heard his sister thinks you're hot. Something about wanting to write a letter to you about offering a shoulder to cry on?"

"Wait. Is he Ginny *Weasley's* brother? I got that letter. I've spoken to her like once," Lavender said, eyes wide with surprise. And then, she leaned forward, intrigued. "Is she as hot as her brother?"

Harry winced. "Ew."

DIAGNOSIS

"You *are* lovely," Blaise said.

Harry's lips curled into a pleased smile even as the sibilant lizard brain voice in the back of his head hissed, *Tom said it first.*

"Thank you," Harry said gently. "You look handsome too."

“Thank *you* for accompanying me tonight. I have the prettiest boy on my arm,” Zabini teased and Harry threw his head back and let out a long laugh. “I noticed that you abandoned me for a moment to speak to Healer Evans and the man that I assume to be your father. You resemble him.”

“I’ve been told,” Harry said coyly. “I...meeting my parents on the first date. Isn’t that a bit much?”

“Oh, so this is a date?” Zabini asked.

Harry snorted. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Well, it’s not a proper one. A proper date with me? Well, you’d know it,” Zabini boasted, smoothing his lapels down. He offered his hand and Harry took it, allowing the man to lead him onto the dance floor. Harry wondered if Zabini would let him lead. He didn’t look the type. Tom would, if only for a laugh about how ridiculous it would look, with Harry being about a head shorter.

“How so, Blaise?”

“I would whisk you away for a lovely night in Italy. The best wine, the best food, the best entertainment. Perhaps a magical opera,” Zabini said.

Harry hummed. That sounded like some upper crust shit that Zabini would be into. He wondered if *he’d* been into it too.

“I’ve always enjoyed being wined and dined,” Harry laughed as Zabini spun him across the dance floor. “I do have to confess. I haven’t dated much since Hogwarts.”

“Well, that means my competition isn’t quite so stiff, is it? Maybe even *no* competition,” Zabini said, his voice going steely for just a moment. It was intriguing. So, there was a backbone underneath all of the foppishness. It just made Harry grin, pressing closer to the man.

“No competition doesn’t mean I’m easy to impress,” Harry reminded him.

“Oh, I never thought that there’d be *anything* easy about you, Harry Potter,” Zabini laughed. “Beautiful, intelligent people are always of the worst kind.”

“Do you count yourself as part of that kind?”

“Why, of course,” Zabini said with a shark’s grin. “I’m no anomaly.”

“I wouldn’t say all that,” Harry cackled as Zabini dipped him and then yanked him up, their faces only breaths apart. “In a Muggle film, this is the part where you’d kiss me in front of all these people.”

Zabini’s brow furrowed for only a moment at the mention of a Muggle film. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

Harry didn't have to think about. He grinned, all teeth. "Have you earned it?"

"I think not," Zabini said, sounding too pleased for someone that had just been rejected. They stopped their impromptu dance, and Zabini began to lead them back to their table, surrounded by other foppish members of the Board like Diggory, a man named Bartemius Crouch who Harry thought looked familiar, and a host of other stuffy old men and women. "Harry, I am very much enjoying your company."

"And I enjoy yours," Harry returned. Zabini was so close, one hand pressed to the small of his back as he guided Harry to the side.

"I would be pleased if you joined me for dinner sometime this week. I know your schedule is busy, as you're a Healer, but—"

"Yes," Harry interrupted. His lips curled into a small smile and he nodded. Zabini's eyes widened as if he were surprised by Harry's immediate answer. "I mean, I don't think I have the time to be whisked away to Florence, but...I'll owl you, yeah?"

"I hope you'll owl me even when we're not going out on a date," Zabini said. "Would you like another drink?"

"Yes, please," Harry said softly. Zabini smirked and leaned down, brushing his lips against Harry's cheekbone before he pulled away, looking at Harry with intense hazel eyes.

"I had to steal at least one kiss."

Harry laughed. "Okay, smooth talker. A champagne would be nice."

Better to not introduce Zabini to messy Firewhiskey! Harry until he put that on lock. Harry's eyes widened as he thought that over. Did he really think Zabini would be around long enough to meet messy Harry? Merlin.

Harry looked up, eyes scanning the crowd and he froze when he caught a burgundy gaze.

Tom was watching him, sipping calmly at his glass of red wine. His knuckles were bone white around the stem. If even exerted the tiniest bit more of pressure, Harry was sure the glass would shatter. Tom had been watching them the whole time, Harry knew. He flinched at the idea of Tom watching Harry and Zabini flirt shamelessly. Tom downed the rest of his wine in one swig and then set the glass down before he stormed from the ballroom, velvet robes billowing.

Harry didn't hesitate before he was crossing the ballroom, skirting around witches and wizards towards the entrance, and he followed Tom up the stairs and down one of the beautiful halls. He turned another corner, went up another two flights, and stumbled to a stop as he saw Tom enter a room. Harry steeled himself and entered. The room was dark.

Tom was standing in the center of the room, his wand drawn. He waved it once, and the fireplace was alight, casting light across the room. It was just as extravagant as everything else in Versailles. Gilded gold and crystals dripped from the ceiling and everything was so

lovely. The sitting room was filled with plush velvet loveseats and a chaise of rich crimson velvet. Tom still hadn't moved.

And then he did, staring at Harry with those burgundy eyes.

"I shouldn't have followed you," Harry whispered as if the thought had only dawned on him as a bad idea. He took a staggering step back, reaching back for the doorknob without looking. Tom waved his wand, and the lock shut with a resounding click.

"Harry."

Harry spun around, burying his face in his hands. "I don't know why...I don't know *why* I followed you. Leave me alone," Harry stammered, trembling in his bottle green robes.

"Harry."

Harry refused to look up. He hated himself. He thought he was over this. He *wanted* to be over this, but he couldn't. He just couldn't because he had known from the *moment* that he had met Tom that he would be the man. The one. Harry had never believed in 'the one' until Tom had looked at him with those burgundy eyes and smug smile, had crooked his finger at him.

"Just leave me alone!" Harry snarled like a wounded animal.

"Are you alright?"

Harry snapped, spinning around and glowering at him.

"No! I'm not alright! Okay? Are you satisfied?" Harry hissed, spitting poison. "I'm not alright. Because you have a fiance, and they call me a whore, and our patients are all fucking *d*ead, and now, you're looking at me again. Stop *looking* at me."

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not looking at you," Tom said, shaking his head. He was looking. He was *looking*, really looking. And Harry could hear the words whispered. *Sweetheart. Darling. Love.* "I am *not* looking at you."

"You *are* looking at me!" Harry spat. "And you watch me. And...*and* Blaise is nice. I just want someone to be *nice* to me. I'm trying to be happy, and I feel like I can't breathe when you call me things like, like, like, *sweetheart* or *darling* or *love*. Like I'm your love. I'm not your love. I can't breathe with you looking at me like that, so just stop!"

All of the air in the room felt like it had been sucked out. Harry felt light-headed, staring at Tom, all of the raw emotion that had been festering, spewing out. Tom tilted his head as if he were weighing his options, and Harry bit his bottom lip, hoping the pain would stop himself from crying. From weeping. He hadn't cried over this man since Hermione, Ron, and Neville had picked him up from the foyer floor. He wouldn't cry again.

He *couldn't* cry again.

“You think I want to look at you?” Tom asked, his voice so terribly cold. “That I wouldn’t rather be looking at my *ex*-fiance? That none of this...that she hadn’t...I have responsibilities. You drive me crazy. You are a beautiful *disaster* waiting to happen. You make it *impossible* for me to feel normal. It makes me *furious* to think about that poncy brat touching you with his hands. I would give *anything* to not be looking at you!”

Harry gasped, a soft shuddering thing and he shook his head, pressing himself against the wall. Tom looked gorgeous. Too gorgeous.

Tom lifted his hand and Harry’s mouth fell open, just so. The older man brushed his fingers against the plush flesh of his bottom lip, dragging it down, sliding his fingers into Harry’s wet, open mouth. Harry keened in the back of his throat, his head falling back against the wall. Tom slid his wet fingers out of Harry’s mouth, dragging them down his jaw, tilting his head up. Harry whined gently.

And Tom’s lips curled into something amused—not something that could be called a smile, not quite. Harry’s mouth was still open and Tom leaned forward until they were breathing air back and forth between their mouths. Harry leaned forward, licking at Tom’s bottom lip, the tip of his tongue flicking against the man’s top teeth. He dragged a hand up Tom’s arm, his nails digging into the meat of the man’s shoulder, anchoring him there.

"Can I kiss you?" Tom breathed into his mouth as if he weren't practically sucking on Tom's bottom lip.

Harry didn’t think about his answer.

“Yes, please.”

DIAGNOSIS

Bellatrix had foregone her dramatic purple lip color for an even more dramatic color. She was sure she made a striking vision, dressed in black, her face ashen but for the black slash of her mouth. She must’ve seemed larger than life, towering over even the taller women in her stiletto heels. She arrived at the bottom of the stairs, already searching for familiarity.

Bellatrix spotted McGonagall and Dumbledore, swirling across the dance floor as if they were gunning for the gold in a competition. She rolled her eyes. Vance and Granger were schmoozing with a number of representatives from neighboring hospitals. Her own nephew was antagonizing Weasley and Longbottom, Greengrass and Abbott appearing quite long-suffering while they served as spectators. Bellatrix huffed.

She needed to hang out with peers.

Her lips curled when she spotted a group of them. Evans, Potter, Lupin, and her cousin, Remus. Not her favorite group of people, but they would do until she could find people more

her speed—i.e. Tom. Briefly, Bellatrix wondered where he was before she shook her head, putting him out of her mind.

“Evans. Centurion. Lupin,” Bellatrix listed in greeting. Her lips curled back in distaste as she regarded her cousin. “Sirius. Aunt Walburga says hello.”

“Did she say ‘hello’ or curse me for being a blood traitor?” Sirius asked dryly. Without giving her a chance to respond, he turned towards his friends with an annoying smirk on his face. “Do you remember that horrid portrait? Ugly, mean, and racist. Good fucking riddance.”

“She was your mother, Sirius,” Lupin said before Bellatrix could, and there was a reason she’d always liked him more than her own cousin, why she thought he was too good for *Sirius*.

“She was a cunt,” Evans said as if that was something *anyone* could say about the former matriarch of the Blacks as if it were a casual thing to say.

“Doesn’t she know *you’re* a blood traitor too?" Sirius asked as if it were a real question.

Bellatrix sniffed, rolling her eyes. “How archaic, Sirius. I’m a woman of Healing. I’m above such thinking,” Bellatrix announced, her voice lofty. “Don’t be so simplistic. Though, from your choice in company, it’s no surprise that you *are* the simplest one. Really, Lupin, you could’ve strived for much better.”

Sirius’ cheeks turned pink. He had always hated the idea of being simple. Always hated Bellatrix’s practiced condescension. According to him, it was because Bellatrix and her sister —never sweet Andromeda—were heinous, prejudiced bitches, but really, it was because Sirius had always been *soft.* And he could see her thoughts crossing her mind. She could tell because his lips curled back into a sneer, and there was something *nasty* in his eyes—something wholly Black—and Bellatrix smiled, readying herself for the cheap shots. This was Walburga’s son, alright.

"I didn't want better. I wanted Sirius," Lupin said as a warning to Bellatrix and Sirius both. He grabbed Sirius' hand and tried to pull him back, but Lupin knew Sirius even better than her, and he was a perfect storm when riled up.

“At least I *have* someone. At least *my* husband didn’t leave me for someone half my age with twice your talent and beauty. At least I’m not a stuck up bitch that fucks my husband’s best —” Sirius snarled, not caring who overheard.

Bellatrix was frozen.

“Enough.” They all turned to look at Evans. Her gaze was frosty as she looked between Sirius and Bellatrix. Sirius quelled under that terrifying stare. “I think that’s quite enough. Don’t you?”

“I don’t think so,” Sirius said, gathering himself. “She came over here intent on aggravating me and causing problems and—”

“And she has. Sirius, be an adult,” Lupin chided gently.

Sirius’ cheeks turned pink.

“Don’t use my son as a weapon to hurt people, Sirius. Don’t do it,” Lily warned.

Sirius squirmed with fury and embarrassment.

“Don’t do it,” Bellatrix said, just as cold.

“Look around. Harry’s gone. And so is Riddle. I wonder where he is. Not with your washed-out arse,” Sirius blurted out before he could think better of it. Potter scowled and Evans’ lips curled into a sneer as she reached forward, her fingers curled like a claw.

Bellatrix took a step back, gathering her tattered pride. As she walked away, she heard Evans hiss, “What did I just fucking say, Sirius? What the *fuck* is wrong with you?”

Bellatrix walked straight towards the drinks, which is the *first* place she should’ve gone. She thought she could handle the night without resorting to a heavy drinking session. She had been wrong. All of the people she admired were here. Editors of journals in which she had published, reputable Ministry workers, and renowned Healers. But, the people she abhorred —Sirius and all his low-class bullshit—was there too. She looked at the bartender with narrowed eyes.

“Double Firewhiskey. No ice,” Bellatrix said, her voice flat.

The bartender—a mousy boy with tiny eyes—jumped at the command in her voice, but did as commanded. Bellatrix snatched it with very little grace and drank at least half of it in the second that she had it.

“And who has driven you to drink so early in the night?”

Bellatrix’s eyes flashed and she glanced at her new companion. “Rodolphus. I’m not in the mood.”

“I know. I’m not smiling,” Rodolphus said gently. He had a glass of red wine in his fingers, gently sipping at it as if it were the richest cognac instead of probably cheap ass wine from a Tesco’s since Evans had *clearly* splurged her budget on the venue. “You look beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous.”

“I know,” Bellatrix said haughtily. The corners of her lips turned up just so. Rodolphus hummed as he finished off his wine. Bellatrix joined him, draining the rest of her Firewhiskey and they simply stared at each other for a long time, drinking one another in. “My cousin is a cunt.”

“What did Black do now?” Rodolphus asked.

“Attempted to embarrass me by essentially calling me a whore in front of his friends and throwing it in my face that Tom would rather be with a bendy little slut with twice the talent I possess,” Bellatrix drawled, averting her eyes. She looked at the swirling robes and the

dancing couples, all happy, happy, *happy*. She wondered if Sirius' words had gotten back to her father yet.

Cygnus would either be pissed at her or Sirius. It was 50-50, and Bellatrix wasn't in the mood to be berated by her father like a child for embarrassing the *family*.

"Did it work?" Rodolphus asked.

Bellatrix choked on her answer. "Yes."

Rodolphus' gaze softened. He reached forward, looping his arm around her waist and pulling her tight. He set his empty wine glass down and snapped his finger, making the bartender refill Bellatrix's drink. His lips brushed against her brow.

"Bella, love...Sirius is an imbecile," Rodolphus whispered against the hairs of her eyebrow. He pushed her Firewhiskey into her hand.

"Oh, I know," Bellatrix said, almost lost. "It's just...honesty is a painful weapon, isn't it?"

"I suppose it can be."

"Cygnus has probably heard. He'll find one of us—him or me, it doesn't matter. He'll be pissed about us embarrassing the family. God. My father has probably heard all my dirty fucking laundry. He was so *happy* to hear about Tom. Wasn't a pureblood, but he was *talented*," Bellatrix said, almost mockingly. She sipped at her Firewhiskey. The burn didn't feel so good this time. Instead, she only tasted the bile rising in her throat.

"Come on. Let's get some air," Rodolphus coaxed and Bellatrix followed him out of the room, her head bent towards him.

Honesty was a painful weapon, so it wasn't her fault that she refused to acknowledge how right Rodolphus' hand felt against the dip of her waist.

She's always been a bitch about pain.

DIAGNOSIS

Tom and Harry had fucked all sorts of ways. Fast. Slow. Violently. And not-so violently. But, they had never fucked like this. Harry didn't think that he'd ever fucked *anyone* like this. It didn't feel like fucking. It was slow and raw and beautiful and *God,* this didn't feel like fucking at all, and Harry was *terrified.*

Harry's face was pressed into the velvet as Tom ducked his head and pressed a kiss right against his hole. He let out a whine, spine snapping straight as he pushed his hips back. Tom's hands were both on Harry's ass, pulling him wide open, licking long stripes from Harry's perineum, up over his whole to the base of his spine and back down.

“Oh. *Fuck*," Harry cried out, reaching back, fingers knotting in perfectly coiffed black hair as Tom licked his hole, soft and teasing, working the tip of it in.

And truly, before Tom, Harry had never had his ass eaten out. Ever. Most guys weren’t totally given except for jerking him off until they finished, and that was if Harry was feeling particularly demanding. Theo had never shown any interest and Harry wasn’t *shy,* but he wasn’t going to just ask, *Hey, do you maybe wanna lick my asshole?*

But, Tom hadn’t even hesitated. Tom had pressed him on all fours and when Harry had expected fingers, he got a tongue and multiple orgasms because Tom had demanded that Harry cum on his tongue, his fingers, and his cock. In that order. It had been glorious.

So, Harry was a slut for a good tongue-fucking. He groaned, swallowing the excess saliva in his mouth so that he didn't dampen the velvet with his drool. His cock ached, hard and pinned between his body and the velvet of the chaise.

“You’re so pretty here, darling. I nearly forgot,” Tom murmured against the soft skin of his ass as he adjusted his hands so that his thumbs were holding Harry open enough to work his tongue inside. Harry let out a choked sound, moaning, pressing back against Tom’s tongue harder. “So, pretty and pink and *delicious.* Won’t you be good for me, Harry?”

Harry shivered, violently, nodding against the chaise. Tom’s tongue dipped in deeper, harder, and the only sounds that filled the room were wet, noisy sounds Tom made behind him, and Harry’s rough panting. Tom sealed his lips over Harry’s hole and sucked, causing Harry to cry out loudly. He sucked once, twice, and then pulled off.

“D-don’t s-sto—”

“Won’t you be good for me, Harry?” Tom growled into the skin of Harry’s trembling thighs, sucking bruises into the sensitive skin there. Harry fell forward, collapsing onto his elbows and he nodded. “Oh, sweetheart, you know better. Answer me.”

Before Harry could answer properly, Tom grabbed his abandoned wand and muttered a spell. When his hand came back to Harry’s flank, it was wet with lube. Without warning, he sank one finger into Harry’s hole, crooking it just so to tug at the rim, just like Harry liked and Tom dove in, fucking his tongue into Harry. Harry howled, clawing at the chaise underneath him.

Won’t you be good for me, Harry?

The words were there, echoing in Harry’s ears, but none of it made sense. Nothing made sense except the feeling of Tom’s tongue brushing against his rim in long, sopping strokes, the feeling of Tom’s finger fucking in and out of his hole. Harry could barely even remember let alone the answer to Tom’s ever-present question.

“Harry!” Tom growled out, lifting his hand and bringing it down with a sharp, resounding smack against Harry’s ass. Harry let out a sharp gasp, his hips canting high, spine arching into the feeling. The ache surged from his ass cheek, that surely bloomed red, down to his

toenails. Harry reached underneath him to grab his aching cock, but Tom reached forward, grabbing his wrist and pinning it to the chaise.

“I’ll be good. I’ll be good,” Harry gasped, cheek pressed into the scratchy fabric of the velvet. Tom’s lips burned a path down from the nape of his neck down the length of his spine, fingers digging into the dimples right above his ass. “C-come on...Tom, *Tom.*”

“Merlin, you’re loud,” Tom breathed, dragging his tongue across that pale expanse of skin.

He sounded delighted.

Harry moaned, crawling forward and rolling onto his back. His head fell back against the head of the chaise. Tom fell back on his haunches, his eyes burning with lust. Harry closed his eyes, looking away, unable to keep from shuddering. Tom wasn’t touching him anymore and still, he could feel the man’s *hands*—hands, hands, hands *everywhere.*

When Harry opened his eyes again, Tom was right there.

“Look at me,” Tom whispered.

Harry whimpered. “I’m always looking at you,” he confessed, slowly spreading his legs, pressing his heels down into the chaise. Tom leaned back, licking his cracked lips. “I want you to look at me forever.”

And then, Tom dove forward, bracketing Harry’s head with his hands as he leaned down and licked his way into his mouth. Harry hummed, his thighs tightening around Tom’s middle, his fingers dragging up Tom’s broad back, nails digging in just the way Harry knew Tom liked it. When Tom pulled back, he pressed one thumb against the swollen bottom lip, dragging it out just to watch it snap back.

“Fucking beautiful,” Tom swore. He grabbed his wand again, Conjuring lube and even though Harry hated the shit, he only rolled his hips up, nodding.

“Come on. Aren’t you gonna *fuck* me?” Harry whispered into the still air.

“Until you cry.” And then, Tom leaned down, pressing little kisses along Harry’s jawline, sucking against his Adam’s apple, the hollow of his clavicle, the jutting bones of his collar. “You’re going to kill me.”

“You promise?” Harry said, snarky.

Tom didn’t react like he thought he would. Instead, he only pressed his cheek against Harry’s and then reached between them, stroking Harry’s cock once and then continuing down, tugging at his balls and reaching to his hole. He smoothly slid two fingers in, where Harry was wet from his tongue and a little lube. Harry let out a high mewling sound as Tom viciously fucked his fingers in and out, pounding those long fingers right against his prostate. And then, he slowed down, adding a third and this time, Tom pulled back so that he was looking into Harry’s eyes, unblinking.

“Ask for my cock,” Tom whispered.

“Fuck me,” Harry said immediately, except the words didn’t feel just right. He didn’t want Tom to *fuck* him, because that felt impersonal. If Tom fucked him, it made him the same as all the other men that had fucked Harry. Harry’s voice softened as he confessed, “I want to be *close* to you. I want you inside of me. Please.”

His voice was barely a breath, but Tom shuddered, and Harry felt the man’s long, fat shaft twitch against him. Tom let his forehead drop against Harry’s shoulder as he plunged three fingers again, slower this time. Now, he only stretched Harry open, and it had been so long since Harry had felt someone else’s fingers open him up instead of his own. He had nearly forgotten how intimate it felt.

Almost.

Tom lifted his head, pressing soft worshipping kisses across Harry's collarbones, moving down to kiss the hard beads of Harry's nipples. Tom closed his mouth around the left one and sucked hard. Harry cried out, because his nipples felt strangely sensitive, more so than usual. It was his inner thighs that usually made him cry out like that. Harry reached down to grab his dripping cock, squeezing the base to stave off his orgasm.

“T-Tom…” Harry whispered as Tom switched over to his other nipple, greedily sucking and nipping at the flesh, making it swollen and red. He took the stiff peak between his teeth and pulled, making Harry yelp. “I want to cum with you *inside* of me.”

Tom swore and, then, he fell back, Conjuring more lube and ran his hands over his thick shaft. Harry felt the head of the man’s cock press against his hole, now soft and pliable. Tom just stared at his cock pressed against Harry’s hole, and Harry squirmed as he imagined what it looked like. His rim felt swollen, and it was probably a dark flushed pink, and though, he was stretched, he imagined it still looked small compared to Tom’s cock. And then, Harry stopped looking at his Tom’s chest and squirmed when he stared directly into a pair of burgundy eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” Tom murmured like a confession, and then he was sliding in, thick and wide. He didn’t stop until he was flush against Harry’s ass, his balls pressing against Harry’s skin.

Harry’s back arched like a bow and he held himself stiffly for a moment, gasping shallowly as he tried to get used to the sudden stretch. Tom’s dry hand pressed against his cheek, and he slowly brushed back his sweat-drenched hair. Tom leaned down, pressing a kiss to Harry’s forehead and then to his swollen lips. He hooked one of Harry’s legs up into the crease of his arm, pulling Harry closer into his lap and bending Harry’s leg back, pressing in deeper.

Harry choked as he felt Tom’s cock press right against his prostate.

"F-fu—move," Harry whispered, begged, and Tom pulled back once and then instead of a slamming thrust like Harry expected, he rolled his hips forward. Harry keened in the back of his throat, nodding and grabbing at Tom's shoulder with one hand, his fingernails digging in. Tom started to build a rhythm, rolling his hips into Harry's, nailing his prostate each time.

Harry's moans turned into loud of sobs of pleasure. He felt like a raw nerve, totally exposed to the elements, and when he looked at Tom, he saw the man looked just as wrecked as he felt.

"It's okay," Tom promised, whispering the words against Harry's lips. He pushed in again, sharp and breath-stealing and Harry sobbed out again, pressing into the perfect stretch of Tom's cock fucking him.

"I...I…" *missed you.*

Harry nodded and didn't finish because he was an emotional fuckup with communication problems, but as he looked up into Tom's eyes, he thought that man had heard what he wanted to say anyway. As if he knew exactly what Harry meant and felt the same.

Tom reached between the two of them as he continued to thrust his body and he wrapped his fingers around Harry's cock and slowly tugged at it, just the way Harry liked. Harry gasped and writhed underneath him, fucking Tom's hand and fucking back onto Tom's cock. The man leaned down, kissing Harry sweetly as he pressed in deeply and ground the head of his cock right up against Harry's prostate and twisted his wrist just so.

Harry's orgasm took him by surprise and he gasped into Tom's mouth as he came, his vision whitening as through it all, Tom ground his cock right against his prostate, pressing their hips as tightly together as possible. Harry came for what felt like a thousand years and less than half of a second. And when it was over, Tom rolled his hips, once, twice, and then stiffened like he always did when he orgasmed, and Harry gasped because Tom orgasming was a *beautiful* sight. The man's face went slack just slightly, and his thin lips parted just so, and all that tension and stress that resided in Tom's shoulders melted away.

Tom fell onto Harry and Harry's arms wrapped around him as he felt Tom press his lips against his hairline and breathe. The man's lips might have moved.

Harry didn't hope too hard. Instead, he dragged his fingers through Tom's hair and relished the feeling of Tom inside of him, his semen marking his insides. Tom winced then because he always became oversensitive and he pulled out, then. Harry groaned, suddenly feeling empty and he felt Tom's cum drip from his hole just so. Tom reached down and kissed Harry's lips threes times and whispered something against them each time.

"You've ruined me," Tom whispered, his eyes full of so much that Harry couldn't tell anything from anything.

"You're fucked up," Harry murmured like an *I love you.*

"You're fucked up," Tom said back, stroking Harry's cheek with a sort of gentleness that Harry had only thought ever existed in a magical theatre. "What does this mean?"

Before Harry could finish their terrible mantra, the door swung open. With a speed Harry didn't know existed, Tom had Conjured a blanket and threw it over them, turning to stare blankly at the person in the doorway.

She stood in the doorway, but she didn't gasp like any other normal person would. Instead, she was very still for a moment before she stepped into the room and the fire illuminated her face. She glanced over her shoulder and very purposefully shut the door behind her.

"Harry," Astoria said quietly. "Your mother is looking for you."

Harry jumped up, stumbling to grab his trousers. Tom was much slower, simply pulling his trousers up and Summoning his robes back over to him. He did it up with a wave of his wand, but Harry was far too frazzled to even do that. Harry's eyes burned with unshed tears.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself as his fingers fumbled over the tiny buttons again and he ran his hand through his sex-crazed hair.

Tom took a step towards him, but Astoria was by his side in an instant, her wand out. She waved it once and his buttons did themselves all the way up to his chin. Gently, Astoria rubbed at his cheeks and ran her fingers through his sweaty hair.

"Do you want to rinse your face first?" she said quietly, pressing her hand against the side of his neck.

"No. We've been gone too long," Harry whispered, trembling with his humiliation.

"Okay. Come on," Astoria said, looping her arm through his. She pulled Harry from the room, making sure that he didn't look back one. She departed the room, leaving Tom to himself with the most poisonous look she could muster aimed at him.

Tom watched her, blankly.

Harry let out a terrible sound and then swallowed it.

"Harry?" Astoria asked.

"Nothing. I...I didn't think anything could top my little sister washing cum out of my hair. I think this just did," Harry said, blankly as they walked down the several flights of stairs back down to the ballroom.

"My older sister found me unconscious in a pool of vomit," Astoria said. Harry jerked to a stop, staring at her wide-eyed. Astoria's lips curled into a terrible smile. "Before I learned how to numb myself, I used alcohol. You're not the only one in the world with problems, Harry Potter."

"You're only, like, 20," Harry pointed out as they began to walk again. "Does Neville know this?"

"Not yet. I will tell him. He is my friend," Astoria said. "I was diagnosed with depression when I was 13. Draco and Daphne helped me save myself. You'll save yourself, Harry Potter."

"From being a slag?" Harry asked, self-deprecating on the very worst days.

"You love that man," Astoria said as if it were an accusation. "You made love with that man while you're at a St. Mungo's fundraiser. At your job. On a date with another man. You're fucked up."

Harry winced.

There it was. That's what that was then. Not fucking. *Making love.*

"What of it? I'm not the reason we're not together," Harry snarled.

Astoria didn't say anything again until they stood at the doors into the ballroom.

"Don't hate yourself for being in love with a man. You can't help who you love," Astoria said. "And don't hate yourself for being fucked up. Just work on unfucking yourself first."

And then, she walked ahead of him, disappearing into the hustle and bustle of the fundraiser. Harry trembled gently and then he steeled himself because he was Harry *fucking* Potter, and he was going to be great. He pasted a smirk on his face and then strode in the room as if his ass wasn't sore, as if he couldn't still feel Tom's hands on him everywhere.

Lily spotted him first. "There you are. Just in time for dinner. Mr. Zabini is *quite* the storyteller," Lily said, and she looked at him for a moment too long before that intrusive searching look disappeared, and turned into approval.

Zabini was standing with his family despite Harry's distinct disapproval of them meeting.

"You've met my father, then," Harry said with a smile. "I thought you were going to whisk me away on a whirlwind date on the continent, first."

Zabini immediately looped his arm around Harry's waist, tugging him closer. Harry grinned up at him and then turned a sharp gaze to the rest of his family. James and Sirius looked pleased with the new development, while Remus was the type to only be happy if Harry was happy. Only Lavender stared at him with steel in her eyes, and she was far too much like their mother, except she probably *knew*. She always knew.

"I was speaking with Cygnus and Amos and we ended up on the topic of your remarkable sister and her recovery, and I just *had* to meet her. She just happened to be in the presence of the rest of your family members," Zabini said, attempting to sound innocent. He wasn't very good at it, even if he pretended to be. "Where have *you* been?"

"We're in Versailles, and the ballroom is loud. I had a look around. It's gorgeous," Harry said as guilelessly as he could.

"I could have given you a tour. This isn't my first time at Versailles. My mother married her fifth husband here," Zabini said. "And her seventh."

James looked mildly alarmed. "Well, then. Dinner?"

"Just about," Lily agreed. "Dinner and then, the speeches."

“We’re over there. See you later. Later, Lav,” Harry said with a smile.

Lavender forced a smile. “You alright, Harry?”

“Always,” Harry said through clenched teeth. He allowed Zabini to tug him away to their table, surrounded by the Board members. Diggory was talking out of his ass, as per usual, and the man that could only be Cygnus Black looked bored.

“Let me introduce you all,” Zabini announced. “*This* is the lovely and illustrious Healer Harry Potter. He is Healer Riddle’s second on the Vol de Mort project.”

And Harry forced a smile on his face. He didn’t remember a single of their names. Instead, he smiled pretty and shook hands. He let Blaise wrap an arm around his wrist and offer him a drink. He talked and ate and dined and *drank* as if he couldn't feel Tom's cum rolling down his thigh.

DIAGNOSIS

Tom took his time as he dressed. He pulled up his pants and his trousers. He slipped back into his dress shoes and he pulled his velvet robes over his body. He buttoned it up by hand this time. He pulled his wand out and with a whispered *Scourgify*, he washed his hands of Harry’s cum and the Conjured lube.

Tom stared at the chaise and then cleaned that too. He decided to clean the area around it and then, sterilized the air because he could smell sex in the air.

Then, he stood in front of the fire and looked deep into the flames for a long moment.

Finally, he took a step back and left the room. He didn’t look back.

Tom paced himself as he walked through the halls of Versailles. He took the long way back to the ballroom. He walked through the Hall of Mirrors and refused to look at a single one of his reflections because if he did, it would mean that he was imagining the man walking next to him, imagining the heat of Harry pressed against his right side.

When he walked back into the ballroom, he paused when he saw his date. Luna was standing in front of a very tall man, babbling excitedly—probably about nargles—and the man was watching her as if he understood every word coming out of her mouth. Luna spotted him and she waved at him, her hand flapping happily. Tom joined her after a half-second of hesitation.

He very purposefully didn’t look for Harry.

“Tom! There’s a cloud of wrackspurts around your head,” Luna said, sympathetically. She patted his arm and huffed. “You’ll need to do something about that.”

“And what would I do, Luna?” Tom asked. He couldn’t even put in the effort of being snide. It wouldn’t matter anyway, because she would answer as if she hadn’t heard it.

"To dispel wrackspurts, one must meditate, as they are attracted to unfocused individuals. A lack of focus would be unwise in your field, wouldn't it, Healer Riddle?" the man asked with a lazy smile. He had reddish-brown hair and a host of freckles, but he looked nothing like Weasley. He rocked back and forth from the balls of his feet to his heels and couldn't seem to make eye contact.

“Oh, Tom, *this* is Rolf Scamander. He is a former patient of Emmeline and he’s a magizoologist!” Luna cooed and she looked up at him, adoringly. Tom stopped himself from gagging.

Merlin, Luna had a *crush.*

“Any relation to Newt Scamander?” Tom asked.

"My grandfather. It's a pleasure meeting you, Healer Riddle. Your reputation precedes you," Rolf said quietly. "And Healer Lovegood has only spoken positive things about you."

Tom looked down at Luna and she just beamed at him.

“Well, Luna is my equal in most ways and my better in all the others,” Tom allowed gently. Luna’s grin only widened and she squeezed his hand once, nodding up at him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. Dinner seems to be starting soon, but I find myself in need of a drink.”

Luna didn’t look too sad to see him go, already drawn back into a conversation with Rolf Scamander about the Crumple-Horned Snorkack and its possible existence, and its relation to the Erumpent. Tom beelined for the drinks table and was relieved when he didn’t see anyone that he knew. With the company he kept, he could’ve seen a number of people nursing bad attitudes and a Firewhiskey. Except, he had no company now.

No friends.

No lover.

Merlin, he was a *loser*.

“Triple Firewhiskey,” Tom said coldly, and the bartender looked at him strangely.

“Healers drink a lot of Firewhiskey,” he commented.

Tom barked out a terribly self-deprecating laugh. “It’s because we spend so much time saving other people’s lives, we only have enough energy to drink Firewhiskey to save our own. It’s called self-medication.”

He took his drink and snuck through the crowd, sneaking out onto the back patio, staring out over the beautiful grounds of Versailles. He sipped his Firewhiskey in silence and basked in the chilly air, in the silence. All of the party noises were dampened and with each sip of Firewhiskey, each time it burned down his throat, he could taste Harry less and less.

He could feel Harry *less and less.*

“How’s your back?”

Tom stiffened and accidentally gulped at least half of his drink. He grimaced through the pain of the fiery burn, and he looked to his left. Rodolphus leaned back against the wall, a cigarette between his fingers. He took a long drag.

“You haven’t smoked in a long time,” Tom said instead.

Rodolphus hummed. “I started up again. After we...stopped talking.”

“Well, that’s not my fault,” Tom snapped almost immediately. “You’re going to get lung cancer.”

“I never said it was. And don’t give me that ‘my body is a temple’ shit. Your liver is probably ready to commit suicide,” Rodolphus said. He paused, shaking his head. “That was tasteless.”

“*You’re* tasteless,” Tom muttered, turning his gaze back out onto the beauty of Versailles, sipping his drink. It was nearly finished already.

“How’s your back?” Rodolphus repeated.

“Why are you asking me that?” Tom snapped.

Rodolphus scoffed. “You and Potter disappear for 45 minutes and then return separately? He with obvious sex hair and you, appearing *very* maudlin for 9 at night. It’s not even after midnight, and you look like you’re ready to go to bed, old man.”

“That’s what his hair always looks like,” Tom muttered defiantly. Rodolphus only stared at him. “We’re not friends.”

"No. You're my brother. As much as fucking Rabastan. More than the little shit even," Rodolphus scoffed and Tom's lips twitched against his own will. They had always loved railing on Rabastan. He was a talented curse-breaker, but a bit of an annoying little know-it-all. "Just. You're never alone, Tom. Never."

“You sound like a bloody girl.”

“What an insult to all girls everywhere,” Rodolphus said, blankly. “Now, are you going to talk to me about your boy or not?”

Tom didn’t know when he’d ended up standing right next to Rodolphus. He held out his hand and Rodolphus passed the cigarette. Tom took a long drag and then passed it back.

“Yeah. Fine. I’ll tell you about him.”

Chapter End Notes

So, not much medicine in the medical dramedy this chapter. But, there is much romantic drama. Hope you liked what is likely to be one of the only smut scenes in this entire fic because I always feel like there's not enough time for smut when there needs to be PLOT. I think I've only written one smut scene before this and it was between Ron and Hermione. So, here's a smut. Hope you liked it.

But, yeah, this wasn't filler. It feels like filler, but it's not. Plot happened here, whether you know it or not. We'll be back to our regularly scheduled time at the hospital within the next two weeks. Stay tuned for that.

Anyway, please leave comments. Love me. I'm a narcissistic writer and comments encourage me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry yawned lazily, slapping his cheeks to add some color to his face. He only succeeded in making his cheeks sting. He bent over the sink and splashed the water onto his face, attempting to wake himself up. He'd been up since the day before, around 1 pm, and Merlin, he thought he'd be past 36 hours shifts already. He was coming up on the end of his 10 months of training. Two more and then, he'd be a fully-fledged Healer, and *new* trainees could pick up the slack.

He cleared his throat and then stepped out of the washroom, walking down the hallway to the Room of Death, as Harry called it now that they had lost so many of their patients. He winced when he saw the man standing outside of the door, waiting for him. Matron Strout wasn't anywhere to be seen, which was regrettable. Harry had been relying on her presence for the past three weeks as a buffer between Harry and Tom.

Tom looked up as if he heard Harry's approach even though Harry had been moving as silently as possible.

“Harry,” he said with those fucking eyes.

“Don’t look at me,” Harry said sharply as he approached the door, his arms crossed over his chest. He pretended that he didn’t see the amused look on Tom’s face, holding out his hand. “Give me a second to review the chart again.”

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Tom purred, leaning into his space. Harry hummed, his nails digging into his palm to stop himself from shivering. Slowly, Harry looked up at Tom through narrowed eyes. Tom smirked down at him. Harry frowned and reached into his robes, pulling out the parchment roughly, unrolling it and he looked down at the details, humming to himself. “Did you have a good night? A date with your boyfriend?”

“You know as well as I do that I was on shift last night and Zabini isn’t my boyfriend. We’re non-exclusive. I’ve learned my lesson,” Harry said with a sneer, glaring up at Tom. Tom raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged.

“I was just trying to make pleasant conversation, love.”

“Do you need to stand so close to me?” Harry snapped.

“You didn’t seem to mind—”

“Nope,” Harry interrupted. He rolled the parchment back up and pushed open the door, walking into the room.

He came to a stop.

Amos Diggory sat at the patient's bedside, his head bent low, soft words leaving his usually brash mouth. The patient was a handsome fellow, but for the waxiness of his face. His hand was pressed against the hospital robes that he'd been pressed into, right over his chest. The only evidence that something was truly wrong was the dark circles under his eyes, so dark that they looked like bruises, and the way his hand trembled.

Harry glanced back at Tom. Tom was watching him, carefully. All guises of playfulness had disappeared in the moments that it took them to step into the room.

"Hello. I'm Tom Riddle, and I'll be your Healer for the duration of your stay at St. Mungo's. This is Healer Harry Potter. He will be assisting me," Tom said, his tone stilted as he took another step into the room, his brow furrowing. He glanced over at Diggory, but Amos was silent and worried. "Healer Potter, present the case."

"Cedric Diggory, age 27, diagnosed with the Hearteater Virus," Harry announced. He glanced over at Tom.

Tom wasn't breathing.

He was as still as a statue, staring at Cedric Diggory with this strange glint to his eyes as if he was staring right through the man. And then, Tom was in motion once more, a generic smirk on his face as he approached.

"Can you tell me about the Hearteater Virus, Healer Potter?" Tom asked.

"Originally, it was the effects of a lost curse. However, it has evolved into what can be identified as a magical variant of cancer. It can be inherited and passed on to offspring through the male's genetic material. The virus itself causes sensations similar to severe heartburn as the victim's heart grows teeth, which begins to devour itself, leaving a lump of flesh as the remainder, once the disease has run its course," Harry recited as expected.

Even as the words spilled from his mouth, he got the feeling that Tom already knew all of that information. Tom watched him carefully, and then slowly turned his gaze back to Cedric and Amos Diggory.

"Mr. Diggory, the Hearteater Virus is incurable. Are you aware of this?" Tom asked.

Amos lurched, sitting up. "But...your project...this Vol-deee-more project is all about curing the incurable. You have to save—"

"Dad," Cedric said softly, grabbing his father's hand and squeezing. Amos fell quiet after a moment, nodding helplessly. "Yeah, I know. I've had a good run. But...I don't...*want* to die. So, I'm here. To...to do anything you need me to do."

Harry's lips curled into a smile at the man's earnest. Cedric looked at them with bold, determined brown eyes, jaw set with decision.

"Well, Mr. Diggory I'm glad to let you know that you don't have to do anything. We'll do everything in our power to heal you," Tom said with such conviction that the room went uncomfortably still for a moment. Tom didn't seem to notice. "We'll proceed as follows: a rigorous treatment of your symptoms as we research the progression and formation of this disease. This means that Healer Potter will be conducting in-depth interviews about the state of your health and your health history. It will be far more invasive than your application process. I will need to know everything down to your blood type."

“Blood type? What is that?” Amos Diggory asked with a frown.

“Blood type is the classification of blood. It has to do with antibodies and antigens. Healer things,” Harry said. He leaned forward, grinning at Cedric. “We’ll get to know each other quite well, Mr. Diggory.”

“Cedric. My dad’s Mr. Diggory,” Cedric said with a grin.

Despite his nerves, Amos’ lips curled into a wide smile.

"Alright, Cedric. We'll be scheduled for a little chat in just a bit," Harry promised. He looked over the charts and looked over at Tom. Tom seemed so very far away. "Anything else, Healer Riddle?"

"If you feel any sort of discomfort beyond what you've previously experienced, please alert a nurse and we'll arrive to assist you as soon as possible," Tom said, voice stilted. Cedric nodded and Tom turned on his heel, walking out of the room without another glance backward.

Amos frowned. “Is he always like that?”

"Yes," Harry lied and nodded at the pair of Diggorys. "See you soon, Cedric."

He rushed from the room and nearly collided with Tom’s back. Tom stood very still, and then slowly turned to look at Harry. His burgundy eyes were shuttered and his jaw was tight.

“Compile a list of any previous medications he may have ingested. I’d like to start from scratch,” Tom said quietly.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked gently.

Tom raised his hand so fast that Harry nearly flinched back. The very tip of his fingers brushed down Harry’s jawline, and Harry remembered then that this was the first time that they had truly been alone.

“Alright is so common, and I’ve never been common,” Tom said instead. “Remember that list after your interview.”

He was gone without another glance back.

DIAGNOSIS

“Luna?” Neville asked, rubbing his heavy gloves to dust off the excess dirt. He looked up and grinned lazily at the young woman standing with Luna. “Hey, Astoria.”

“Neville,” Astoria said, beaming strangely. She reached out, grabbing his wrist in her vice-like bird grip and she tugged him up out of the dirt in the greenhouse. Neville stumbled as Astoria dragged him with inhuman strength. “We’re on a case together!”

“Are we…” Neville trailed off, frowning. He glanced over at Luna.

“We’re going to need your potions and plants expertise, Neville. We have to get to Hogwarts,” Luna said, looking quite grave.

“What? Why?” Neville asked with a frown.

"There's been a breakout. An STI breakout."

Neville blanched, and he watched Luna, searching her eyes for humor. She didn't smile at him, staring at him with a grim expression. He looked over at Astoria. Her lips were pressed into a firm, stern line—not unlike McGonagall's default expression—except, every few moments, the corner of her lips would twitch as if she were trying not to burst into a round of inappropriate cackles.

“Which...STI?” Neville allowed, his cheeks rapidly turning bright red.

“It is an assortment,” Astoria provided helpfully.

“Why do you need *me*?" Neville asked instead, pressing away from the embarrassment of an STI breakout at Hogwarts, of all places. He didn't want to think about all the shit that teenagers got up to. He didn't even want to hear about all the shit his friends got up to.

"You'll function in two roles. But, we must go *now*. We’re scheduled to arrive in less than ten minutes. Learn as you go,” Luna urged. It was so strange to see her without her customary smile. It must have been serious, Neville acknowledged, and he couldn’t very well tell a Department Head, *sorry, no, I don’t want to go see a bunch of teenagers with Firecrotch, thanks.*

“Okay,” he sighed, pulling off his gloves. “Please don’t get me in trouble with Snape.”

Luna smiled, then and she shook her head. “Let me deal with Severus. Come along, Neville. If we get there now, we may be able to get a spot of tea in before we proceed to the main event. Professor Dippet always has the best biscuits.”

Now, that sounded more like Luna.

“All right,” Neville said, as he packed away the rest of his Herbology tools, stashing it in the drawers of his workstation. “I don’t have any patients today.”

“You are about to,” Astoria said with a toothy smile. Neville looked away from it, vaguely uncomfortable. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Astoria’s grin grow wider. “Come now.”

She was practically skipping ahead of the pair, her eyes wide and bright. Luna looked more relaxed now that she had enlisted Neville's help.

“Where’s Hannah?” Neville asked.

Luna pursed her lips. “She’s in charge of the Children’s Ward today.”

Neville’s eyebrows rose. He was impressed. “Why me? You have two students.”

"You are a Plants & Poisonings trainee. You have been trained by Severus and Pomona. You are best suited for the task at hand. I'll be in need of an on-site pharmacist, of sorts," Luna explained vaguely. She looked over at Neville suddenly, intrigued. "Did you know that Minister Fudge has an army of heliopaths?"

“Heliopaths? Is that a creature?” Neville asked with a frown.

“Yes,” Luna said, almost impatiently. “It’s a spirit of fire that gallops and burns everything its path.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” Neville said.

“That is because they do not exist,” Astoria called over her shoulder.

Luna frowned. “Yes, they do.”

Astoria glanced over her shoulder and stared at Neville pointedly, her lips pursed. “Luna, I have admitted to believing in a number of your creatures. You still have not presented substantial evidence.”

“I will,” Luna insisted. “I’ve talked to Rolf about it.”

“You still talk to Rolf?”

“Rolf?” Neville asked.

Luna hummed. “Rolf Scamander. He’s a magizoologist. He’s Newt Scamander’s grandson,” Luna said, sounding delighted. “He said that he’d introduce us.”

They reached Luna’s office, and as Neville stepped inside, he was both quite surprised and totally unsurprised. The room was stuffed to the brim with medical and magizoology journals, all making neat steady piles that laddered up to waist height. Propped against all of the walls were various knickknacks and crafts in varying stages of finality. There were canvases splattered with paint, some forming faces, some not. There was one painting that was nearly done, and it was a stunning likeness of the young woman standing next to Luna.

“That’s quite good,” Neville said, eyes wide. “You paint?”

“I dabble,” Luna said with a shrug. “Astoria is a very good subject.”

“I aim to please,” Astoria drawled in a forced American accent. It was so harsh and startling that Neville let out a burst of laughter. Astoria looked pleased with herself.

Luna waved her wand, levitating a few books out of the way to reveal a fireplace. “*Incendio*,” she said with a merry wave of her wand, and the fire roared.

“You have a fireplace?” Neville asked, eyes wide. “Is that allowed?”

“Luna does she wants. Dumbledore would be lost without her to run the Children’s Ward,” Astoria announced. “Her first case as a full Healer, she helped subdue an Obscurus and after treatment, the Obscurus was removed, and the girl was placed with a new family. It is legendary.”

Neville’s eyebrows traveled even farther up his forehead. Luna smiled.

"Don't let the radish earrings fool you. I'm pretty hardcore," Luna giggled. She reached for the tiny chipped terracotta pot on the mantle, taking a pinch of Floo powder. She stepped into the flames, clearing her throat. "Professor Dippet's office, Hogwarts."

She disappeared in a flurry of green flames. Astoria followed her example and disappeared in a rush of green flames. Then, it was Neville's turn, and when he emerged, he came out into an office that he'd only been in once before, after he'd fallen off his broom in his first year, cracked his Remembrall, and Headmaster Dippet had tried to interrogate him about who the culprit had been in the whole ordeal.

They had never figured that out.

Armando Dippet was an old man. He wasn't precisely frail, but he looked feeble, almost. His beard was thick but quite short in comparison to Dumbledore's, and only a few wisps of stark white hair emerged from his liver-spotted pale head. Even still, he held himself with the same dignity and pride that he'd possessed from the first time Neville had spotted him as he had been paraded into the Great Hall, terrified.

“Healer Lovegood,” Dippet announced, arms spreading wide.

It was then that Neville noticed the five other people in the large office—the Heads of Houses. Charity Burbage, Silvanus Kettleburn, Septima Vector, and Aurora Sinistra—for Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Slytherin, and Ravenclaw, respectively— all appeared vaguely uncomfortable. Rounding out the group was Madame Pomfrey in her red robes and white apron.

“Please, Headmaster, I’ll always be Luna to you,” Luna said quite sweetly. “And you too, Professor Sinistra.”

“You’re quite the accomplished young woman, Luna. You call me Aurora now,” Professor Sinistra.

She wasn't a professor to be trifled with. That much Neville remembered about her.

"And Mr. Longbottom. Healer Longbottom, rather," Professor Kettleburn said. Neville grinned at his former Head of House and nodded.

"He'll be assisting you in the potion brewing, Madame Pomfrey. He'll be our on-site pharmacist, as well as an educator for today. This is my student, Astoria Greengrass. She was formerly the student of Healer Evans before she decided to specialize in magical diseases and maladies in children. She'll also be assisting in education and diagnosis," Luna rattled out.

Educator.

Suddenly, it occurred to Neville what he was doing there.

"Wait...you want me to teach?" Neville squeaked.

Luna blinked at him and smiled. "Well, of course. The STI breakout is in the fifth through seventh years. While Madame Pomfrey and I try to trace how this happened, you'll be helping educate them about safer sex practices and STIs."

Astoria grinned. "This is going to be *fun.*"

Neville's cheeks turned bright pink. He was going to stand in front of at least 300 students and talk about keeping your sex healthy. He had to talk to teenagers—who he knew were vicious and cruel and sometimes didn't grow out of it, i.e. Hermione and Harry—about their genitals. Without stuttering or blushing.

Well, wasn't this horrifying?

DIAGNOSIS

Harry walked through the thin aisles, running his finger over each shelf. He looked down at his parchment again, reminding himself of the call number. Then, he plucked the case file off the shelf and passed it over to Tom. He flipped through it briefly and hummed.

"Not Hearteater Virus, but...could be helpful," Tom allowed.

"What other testing do I need to do during the interview?" Harry asked curiously. "I don't really know how to proceed with this. Hearteater Virus is rare."

"Incredibly," Tom said, sounding purposefully bland.

"It's also not a spell or a curse, Tom. This is decidedly out of my comfort zone."

"And Hanahaki wasn't?" Tom retorted.

Harry scowled. “You know what I mean. This is a case for Luna, isn’t it?”

"No. It's our case," Tom said, quite firmly. He looked around at the other Healers peeling through the library shelves as if to make sure they weren't being overheard. He waved his wand anyway, casting a privacy charm. "The Hearteater Virus is believed to be the effects of a long-lost curse, as you stated before. It's spell damage. It behaves like spell damage. It's Dark magic. *Blood*magic. It’s our case.”

“Has there been any hope of recovering the original curse, then? I don’t know much about spellcrafting, but, if we found it, we could reverse-engineer it,” Harry pointed out.

Tom scowled to himself. “If anyone would know, it would be the Unspeakables. I’ll have to apply for a permit to get into their libraries again,” Tom muttered to himself. “The Unspeakable, Knox—”

“Nott. His name is Theo Nott,” Harry corrected.

“Don’t care,” Tom said, voice stilted. Harry’s lips curled into an amused smile. “Nott will know about spellcrafting, I’m sure. But, that won’t be enough. The original curse doesn’t matter.”

“How do you know?” Harry retorted.

Tom grimaced. “I am Ahab,” he said instead.

“I don’t get your pretentious reference,” Harry said spitefully.

Tom’s grimace quirked into a small smile that immediately fell again once he caught sight of the approaching figure coming up behind Harry. Harry’s brow furrowed and he turned just in time for an arm to look around his waist and jerk him in for a long kiss. Harry’s eyes widened and his hands came up suddenly, pushing the offender away.

“Harry Potter, as I live and breathe,” Blaise Zabini teased.

An awkward smiling grimace crossed Harry’s face. “Blaise, I didn’t know you’d be at the hospital today.”

“Neither did I, but then, I was struck by the oddest longing. I wanted to see you,” Zabini said with a lazy grin.

“This is a hospital. Not a meet-and-greet,” Tom said, his expression flatter than his voice, even.

Zabini continued to look perfectly pleasant, except around the eyes. His eyes sharpened. “Well, I am on the Board for the hospital. I have to check up on department heads as well, you see? Just to make sure their work is up to par.”

Harry frowned. “I hope it’s not Healer Riddle’s work that you’re trying to look at. Seeing how it’s unnecessary and illegal, at this point, no matter your status, Blaise,” he said as sweetly as possible. His stare told Zabini all he needed to know.

Off-limits or I end you.

“Of course,” Zabini allowed, turning his gaze back onto Harry. “Let’s do lunch later.”

“He can’t. He has interviews to conduct,” Tom said shortly, looking vaguely disinterested again.

“Doesn’t he get a lunch hour? How unethical,” Zabini retorted. He turned his gaze back onto Harry. “How about dinner? I promised you Italy.”

Tom made an aborted sound in the back of his throat. Harry recognized Tom’s mockery. He nearly blushed.

"Um, I have a long week," Harry said, scrambling. "Dinner? Do you want to do dinner? At my place? With my housemates?"

“Ah, the elusive housemates,” Zabini said. “I’d be delighted.”

“It’s Number 12 Grimmauld Place. In London. You can use the Floo,” Harry promised. He took a step back, carefully peeling Zabini’s arm from around him. “I’ll see you then.”

“Shall I be bringing a night bag?” Zabini asked, eyes flashing.

Harry snorted. “Why the fuck not,” he sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Then, I bid you adieu. And to you, Healer Riddle," Zabini said, bowing with a flourish and then disappearing back the way he came from.

“Adieu-don’t,” Tom muttered under his breath. He looked over at Harry, raising an eyebrow. “You have the worst fucking taste. I just can’t.”

“Well, I dated you,” Harry snapped back. “Now, no more of that. You don’t get to have an opinion. Talk to me more about the Hearteater Virus.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Uh, hello. I am Healer Neville Longbottom. And uh,” Neville stammered, gesturing over to Astoria wildly. Astoria looked utterly calm as she sat on the edge of the desk, looking over the crowd of faces.

The students had been organized by year, all filing into the Great Hall with a strange air of trepidation. They hadn’t been sure what was going on. There were only rumors, and now, faced with the hunter green of a pair of trainee Healers, some of the rumors were being confirmed. They seemed a little too excited about it.

“I am Healer Astoria Greengrass. Today, we will be teaching you about safer sex,” she said, much calmer than Neville had. The entire room broke into a murmur, all looking at one another in excitement and glee. Astoria didn’t seem affected by this. “We will be talking, in great detail, about the most common STIs that affect young witches and wizards today. I will tell you now: if you are uncomfortable, you may leave the room at any time. There is no need to ask. Otherwise, sit loose.”

“Sit tight,” Neville corrected gently.

Astoria raised an eyebrow. “Does it matter?” she asked quite severely.

“The idiom doesn’t make sense otherwise,” Neville explained, cheeks still pink.

“Very well,” Astoria sighed before she turned to the students. “You have sex. Teenagers have sex. Perhaps professors at Hogwarts don’t want to think this, but it is true.”

Some of the students jerked at how plainly Astoria said it. Cheeks burned pink and they exchanged uncertain glances. Neville looked out amongst the crowd and saw a young woman watching, her lips curled into a smirk. She had a stylish pageboy haircut and a dusting of freckles across her cheeks. It couldn't be anyone but Ginny Weasley. She resembled her brother. She was watching him as if she knew what Neville was thinking.

“Sex is good. Sex is a natural, healthy part of life,” Astoria said loudly. “Isn’t that right, Neville?”

Neville jumped. “Yes, Astoria. Yes, it is.”

“And sometimes, sex is not part of life. This is okay. You don’t have to sex. But, if you want to, you must have sex *safely*. I do not say safe, but ‘safer’ because there is always risk involved in sex. This should not scare you as long as you armed with the proper information. We will begin with the condom demonstration,” Astoria announced. She waved her wand, conjuring a horrifyingly realistic dildo, complete with veins a pair of balls attached to the base. With unnecessary force, she slammed it on the table where the *professors ate their food.*“Healer Longbottom, present the condom.”

Neville swallowed as he reached into the basket that Madame Pomfrey had given them with a grim expression on her face. The wrapping glittered gold.

“First: you must check if the condom is open or expired. There should be an air pocket that you can feel. Like a...what is the word?” Astoria asked with a frown.

“A bubble,” Neville muttered.

“Bubble. Do not open with your teeth. You run the risk of tearing ze latex,” Astoria said. For the first time, she slurred her ‘th’s with her accent, and Neville sat up straighter.

Was she nervous too?

She continued to do as she narrated, demonstrating the proper way to put on a condom. Her speech didn't slur anymore, but Neville suddenly felt more at ease. He was constantly

surrounded by people that took to Healing as if they were preternaturally good. Even Ron was quite the Healer once he had found his stride. Neville had always struggled and had decided on Healing because he wouldn't have to do any real public speaking. It was nice to see how human Astoria was.

Neville cleared his throat, drawing attention to himself again. “Now, why do we use condoms?”

There was a long beat of silence as if the students weren't sure if the question was rhetorical or not.

Neville answered himself. “Because, even if we’re on Muggle hormonal or using magical birth control, we also need a barrier method. It is best to go with dual protection.”

“But, not two condoms. That is a horrible idea,” Astoria deadpanned.

Another long beat of silence.

Then: “Can we hear about the STIs now? I’m bored!”

And Neville was pretty sure Ginny Weasley had just heckled them. There were random bursts of laughter.

Astoria looked grim. “Very well.”

“Is this the part where you tell us if we have sex, we’re going to get the Priapean Worm and die?” a familiar looking girl asked quite bored. Neville thought she might be Randy Vain. Maybe. He just knew that he had possibly seen her during the disastrous house party that they had thrown.

“No,” Astoria barked. “But, if you have unprotected sex and contract Priapean Worm, your ovaries will be devoured. Now be quiet and learn.”

Randy Vain looked quite pale then. Neville noticed briefly that there was something...off about her. Something like otherworldly. And then, he was distracted again. Astoria was watching him.

Showtime.

"Okay: let us begin with one of the most common STIs: Apparating Warts, in which warts, contracted through physical contact, will explode and will reform when an individual is...aroused."

Neville turned pink.

DIAGNOSIS

“I fucking hate Zabini.”

"You hate that he's fucking your ex," Rodolphus corrected. He took a long sip of Early Grey and sighed as if he'd just experienced nirvana. "What was he supposed to do? Wait for you?"

“Fuck off, Rodolphus.”

Tom drank his black coffee, moodily, staring at Harry from across the cafeteria. Harry—despite being rather infamous—was always surrounded by a group of people. They were all like moths to a flame, enamored with just being in his crude presence. Tom scoffed and then paused. Had he been like that?

“Why aren’t you two together?” Rodolphus asked as he poked at the tomatoes in his salad, his nose wrinkled.

"I already told you. Bella said—"

“Bella’s full of shit,” Rodolphus interrupted, eyes narrowed. “Don’t pretend people can tell you what to do, Tom. I’ve known you since you were prepubescent. Bella can’t tell you what to do. Nobody can tell you what to do. So, why aren’t you with him?”

Tom shifted in his seat but didn't answer. He stared at his own food—a subpar slab of meat that was supposedly a roast and asparagus.

“He hasn’t met Nagini,” Tom murmured, his voice going soft as he mentioned his familiar. Rodolphus looked surprised by that, raising an eyebrow.

“He’s been to your home. Where has she been then?” Rodolphus asked curiously.

Tom’s lips quirked into something resembling a smile. “The vents. She likes him though. Or rather his scent. Which is the same thing to her.”

“Nagini doesn’t like anyone,” Rodolphus said pointedly. He didn’t have to say anything else, only giving Tom a look that reminded the Department Head of what it was like during their years at Hogwarts. While Tom and Bella went around causing trouble and being general assholes to anyone that stood in the way of their ambitions, it only took a quelling look from Rodolphus and a sigh to reel them in somewhat.

Even now, it worked, and it made Tom blister with rage. Even now, just a look from Rodolphus and Tom could read everything his eyes said. And yet, he'd kept the fact that he was *fucking* Tom’s fiance from him.

“I’m trying to conquer death. I don’t have time—”

“You had time to fuck him at a fundraiser,” Rodolphus interrupted again.

“Stop interrupting me.”

“Stop being an arse,” Rodolphus retorted, just as quick. He sighed, finally giving up on his salad and pushing it to the side. He leaned across the table, looking directly into Tom’s

burgundy eyes. “You’re scared of him. Don’t say you’re not because you are. Bellatrix loved you. But, not like that, and you never loved her back. You’re scared because you love him.”

“I never said that,” Tom barked.

Rodolphus pursed his lips and stared at his friend, shaking his head. “You’re an idiot. You’re letting the best thing that has ever happened to you get away because of your pride and your own fears.”

Tom was silent for a long moment, looking down at his food.

“Cedric Diggory has Hearteater Virus,” he said quietly.

Rodolphus’ expression went blank. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know.”

They stared at one another for a long moment. Rodolphus leaned back in his seat and then looked up, over Tom’s shoulder. His entire expression softened and his lips curled into a smile. He seemed totally unaware of the sudden change.

“Oh, do we sit together again?” Bellatrix squealed as she rushed over, sliding into the seat next to Tom. She bounced up and down, her eyes wide, and eyebrows arched. Her smile seemed childish and immediately her hand clamped around Tom’s forearm. “Are we friends again?”

“I’m not friends with you,” Tom snapped, jerking his arm away. He looked away, forcing the *tiny* amount of amusement from his face, hiding it with a scowl.

Rodolphus snorted. He could see right through Tom.

Bellatrix’s smile fell. “Why are we sitting here then?”

“We're not sitting here. *I’m* sitting here, Bella-donna,” Rodolphus said with a grin. “Tom and *I* are friends again.”

“No! That’s not how that works. We’re *all* friends or none of us are friends,” Bellatrix snapped impatiently. “You two can’t hang out without me. It’s against the *rules*.”

She said it so snottily that Tom was briefly thrown back to their time at Hogwarts, the trio sitting in a similar fashion as the current one, except dressed in emerald green and silver and black, surrounded by other Slytherins.

“Is it?” Rodolphus drawled, a teasing glint in his eyes.

“It *is*,” Bellatrix said forcefully.

Tom hummed. “Is it really against the rules?”

“Stop it!” Bellatrix hissed. If she could, she’d stomp on the ground like a child.

“I don’t know, Bella,” Tom sighed. “Are those really the rules?”

“I don’t they’re the rules. We *all* have to be friends?” Rodolphus continued.

Bellatrix’s cheeks turned red. “You’re both a pair of fucking assholes.”

“You tried to poison me with a croissant,” Tom pointed out.

“I didn’t!”

“Then, why did I vomit immediately after taking a bite of the croissant?”

“You had Black Cat Flu because you don’t get vaccinated like a *sane* person!” Bellatrix hissed.

Rodolphus hummed. “Are you really the one to be accusing someone of being insane, love?”

“Oh, fuck you both!” Bellatrix said sharply and she stood up, flouncing away, her nose held high in the air. Before she was out of earshot, Rodolphus broke into a fit of cackles, and she threw up her middle finger as she departed.

“That was fun,” Rodolphus said surprised as if they hadn't played the same games with Bella before their lives had gone to shit.

Quietly, Tom's lips curled into a smile and he said, "It...was."

DIAGNOSIS

“If you have an STI, you are not dirty. If you do not have an STI, you are not clean. You just are,” Neville said, softly, as he looked at all of the staring faces. They had sat rapt through the entire spiel, intrigued by everything that the pair of Healers had to say.

Neville’s nerves were nearly nonexistent at that point, having fallen into the rhythm of speaking. Astoria’s constant presence was a balm as well, and he even managed to crack a few smiles during the entirely impromptu class.

"There is no shame in sex or in contracting an STI. No more shame. Do not be afraid to speak up or ask for help," Astoria suddenly said, her voice cracking across the silent Great Hall. "If you cannot ask your professors, you will write to me. I will always respond. Do not be ashamed."

"After we finish up here, you will all proceed to the Hospital Wing, where you will be tested by the Healer-in-charge, Luna Lovegood. She will either clear you or send you to me with a prescription. I will fill the prescription right there. No matter whether you are cleared or sent to me, you will finally go to Healer Greengrass. She will be at the door, ready to distribute a

care package of sorts," Neville said. At this, he grimaced. Astoria had organized those. He had no idea what was in them.

“It’s condoms. And lube. Different types of lube. Pamphlets,” Astoria announced, louder than she needed to. She said ‘lube’ as if she were *delighted* to even be sanctioned to say it. “And if you’d like, I will recommend a sex toy to you. Masturbation is lovely and has been proven to have numerous health benefits. I recommend the butt plug. Everybody has a butt.”

The room exploded in titters of laughter. Neville’s cheeks turned pink and he sighed, shaking his head.

"Thank you so much, Healer Greengrass," he forced through his teeth. Neville let out a long-winded sigh. That had been two hours of his life he'd never get back, and he had the feeling his day had barely started. "Now, head to the Hospital Wing and arrange yourselves in a queue. We'll be there shortly. Thank you for listening."

As soon as they were dismissed, the students erupted into loud chatter that rattled Neville’s ears. He stood from his perch and looked over at Astoria. She looked rather pleased with herself. She looked over at Neville and grinned.

“That went well, *non?*” she asked.

“It did,” Neville allowed. The pair of Healers edged through the crowds of students, attempting to fight their way ahead of the pack before they were trampled by eager teenagers. “I expected to be booed out of the Great Hall.”

Astoria shook her head, an easy smile on her face. “They were too frightened.”

Neville noticed then that he was no longer afraid of her strangely terrifying grin.

“What do you mean?” he asked curiously. “They didn’t seem scared at all.”

“Everyone is scared about what they don’t know. Maybe not scared,” Astoria said, her brow furrowed. She hummed to herself, quickly sliding out of a running fifth year’s way. They were bounding up the stairs in cliques towards the Hospital Wing.

“Then what?” Neville asked.

"No one told them about sex. That it was okay. Instead, it was kept quiet about. They did not have all the information. And then this outbreak happens. They think ‘Sex is *not* okay, truly’. And they will be frightened to engage in a healthy activity,” Astoria said, quietly, sounding dismayed. She looked up from the ground, a fierce light entering her eyes. “I will talk to Luna and Madame Pomfrey. There should be mandatory comprehensive sexual health added to the curriculum.”

“You don’t think that’s the parents’ job?” Neville asked curiously.

“*Non,*” Astoria disagreed. Then, she faltered. “Maybe. But, we can not rely on parents being comfortable enough to explain. I would come in once a fortnight to teach. Anyone could. We will train all the Healers in the Children’s Ward. We are here now to treat, but what if

someone had not told Madame Pomfrey. They could have gotten very sick. They would not have done anything because of shame. Shame is horrible. No more."

She walked briskly ahead of Neville. Neville looked at her, stunned. And then, a delighted smile spread across his face—she was passionate and fierce, just like Hermione, and almost-bullheaded, just like Ron could be, and she so fiercely believed in goodness, just like Harry. Astoria Greengrass was far more like them than they had all first thought.

He raced after her, skipping steps to catch up to her and they walked in companionable silence to the Hospital Wing. There was already a queue wrapping around the corner as they got to the doors leading into the Hospital Wing. Neville's assumption had been right. He'd be there until dinner time. He scooted around one of the students in line and walked back through the Hospital Wing to Madame Pomfrey's office.

He took note. Luna and Madame Pomfrey were pouring over student records.

"So, what's the consensus?" Neville asked.

"5 students reported symptoms of Magicrabs," Luna said softly. She had a tiny smile on her face despite Madame Pomfrey's frazzled expression.

Astoria smile. "*Merde,*" she said quietly. She looked over at Neville. "I thought it was something harder to treat."

"Delousing potions aren't too terrible. I can get started on it. Astoria should run to St. Mungo's and see if there are louse combs lying around," Neville said. Almost immediately, he rolled up his sleeves and walked to the next door in Madame Pomfrey's office. He looked around her small lab—stocked with three cauldrons and an apothecary's worth of ingredients. He looked around, impressed. "This is an amazing set-up, Madame Pomfrey."

"Thank you, Healer Longbottom," she said with a stern smile. Then, she turned to Luna and raised her wand. "Are you ready to diagnose, Healer Lovegood?"

"It's *Luna*, Madame Pomfrey," Luna reminded her. But, she rolled up her sleeves and brandished her wand. Astoria still hadn't moved.

As Neville began to close the door, he heard Astoria make her proposition. "Wait, Madame Pomfrey, I have an idea. I would like us to prevent this from ever happening again—"

DIAGNOSIS

Harry knocked on the door twice before entering the room. He was pleased to see that it wasn't dark, and Cedric was sitting in bed, looking very alert. He thumbed through the next page in his book, his tongue peeking out from between cracked pink lips.

"Mr. Diggory, I see you've woken up from your nap," Harry said as cheerfully as he could.

He hated waking up patients. They were always in a foul mood with him afterward, accusing him of not having any bedside manners.

“It’s Cedric, remember,” Cedric reminded him with a lazy grin. “I didn’t sleep for very long. I *don’t* sleep for very long.”

Harry hummed and strode to Cedric’s bedside, settling in the chair that his father had left unoccupied. He quickly scribbled down Cedric’s words with his Self-Inking quill and asked, “Can you tell me why that is?” He smiled when Cedric looked at him, disturbed and nervous. “Don’t worry, Cedric. This is really quite informal.”

"It's just odd," Cedric said, grey eyes cast towards his lap. And he really was quite handsome—broad-shouldered, if a little thin in the face, large grey eyes, and the longest eyelashes. "My application for this study was already so...invasive."

“It could quite possibly get even more so,” Harry said quietly. “But, that’s because our job is to do our very best to keep you alive. And if we cannot, allow you to die with dignity.”

Cedric looked up, then, eyes sharp. Harry winced at his too-honest response. But, then, Cedric smiled.

“I like that,” he said quietly. “It’s honest.”

Harry smiled. “I try to be,” he said with a shrug. Instead, he felt like a fucking fraud. “So… can you tell me a little about your family medical history? The Hearteater Virus is genetic through the male line so...”

“My father said no,” Cedric said quietly. “We looked back—we’re purebloods, so we have records—and there’s nothing. I’m the first one.”

“It’s probably a genetic abnormality then,” Harry said under his breath, scrawling down Cedric’s answers. He looked up at Cedric with a tiny smile. “Okay, so we have your PMH—past medical history—from your past doctor. What hospital was he affiliated with? Would you say that he treated you to the best of his abilities?”

“Healer Wainscott was a really great Healer. She was our family Healer. She’s really old—helped my great-grandmum give birth to my grandfather,” Cedric said, sounding vaguely impressed. “She treated me as well as she could. She recommended the study and then, when Dad invested in St. Mungo’s, we made the definitive choice.”

“Makes sense,” Harry said. He frowned. The timing was weird. Cedric’s father had invested in St. Mungo’s right around the time that Cedric had decided to apply for the study. It seemed that he thought that he could bribe his son’s way in. Loving, if unethical, and clearly, Amos Diggory didn’t know the kind of hardass that Tom Riddle was. “No major illnesses except a childhood bout of dragon pox, then.”

“It was really mild. I was vaccinated and everything, but I got it anyway,” Cedric said with a shrug. He leaned forward, curious. “What’s it like being a Healer?”

Harry’s lips curled into a smile. “I thought I was conducting the interview here.”

“You are, I guess. But, I want to know anyway,” Cedric said, quite boldly.

“It’s hard work, and I’m still learning,” Harry said, pinching at his hunter green robes.

Cedric looked thoughtful. “You act as if you know what you’re doing.”

“Does anyone?” Harry asked, shrugging.

"I guess not. How did you end up working with Healer Riddle? I think he's quite famous, isn't he? My father said that he was the one that would do it, if there was anyone. My Healer said it too. The one that would be able to cure me," Cedric said carefully. He leaned back in his chair with a grin on his face, raising an eyebrow.

“I think...that if anyone could, it would be him. He would get the closest,” Harry said. “I was on a case on my first day. It ended up more complicated than I originally thought. He made sure I followed the case until the very end. We work well together.”

“He’s a little stilted, isn’t he? Disconnected,” Cedric said.

“He can be,” Harry allowed. “Now, how are you feeling currently? Can you tell me your—”

“Chest pain, shortness of breath, mild heartburn, and palpitations,” Cedric recited almost immediately. He grinned at Harry’s surprise. “I always feel that way. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Alright then. What medications have you been taking for the symptoms?” Harry asked.

“You’re Lily Evans’ son. That’s the other reason my dad wanted me in this study, you know,” Cedric said.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Wait. What?”

“He puts a lot of weight on family and reputation. I don’t know if I agree with that, but I do know that your mother is impressive. He thought that her talent was present in you as well. That you’d be the best of your generation, just like she was,” Cedric said. “Is he wrong?”

No.

“I...I wouldn’t know yet, would I?” Harry said with a laugh. “Now, medications?”

“Burn-healing paste to my chest. It made the heartburn nearly nonexistent,” Cedric said brightly.

Harry leaned forward. “Fascinating. You had quite the Healer.”

“I did,” Cedric agreed. And then, he paused, tilting his head. “I wouldn’t mind if I died.”

“Do you need a Mind Healer as well?” Harry asked sharply.

“No. Mind, I don’t want to die. But, I’ve had two years to get used to it, and it’s only been getting worse,” Cedric said. “I used to play Quidditch. I wanted to be on the Puddlemere United team. I found out because I got all the way through the trials, and then, they did an examination and saw it. The teeth. So, I wouldn’t mind. I’ve gotten used to it.”

Harry’s eyes hardened. “Well, I haven’t. I’m going to do *everything* in my power to make sure you stay alive, Cedric Diggory.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry only knocked on Tom's office door once before he opened the door with his hip, notes in hand. Tom looked up from his own work, a small smile on his face as if he couldn't help himself. Harry's lips twitched into a weak smile and he sighed as he lightly kicked the door closed behind him.

“I got all of Cedric’s medical history. Nothing extreme has been done to reverse the effects so, we have a pretty clean slate to work with,” Harry said, pleased with his findings. He sat on the edge of Tom’s desk, dropping the notes directly in front of Tom. Tom looked down at them briefly, flipping through them.

It was nice that Tom never berated him for his terrible scrawl, only deciphering it and taking what was useful. Hermione liked to rag on him about it.

“Interesting. Burn-healing paste applied to his chest area as a way of dealing with heartburn?” Tom murmured softly. Harry nodded excitedly.

“I’ve never heard of anything like it. Except, well, once. It was—”

“Bellatrix. It’s metaphorical. Probably based in vinegar. Treat it like acid reflux almost. Management is always about treating the symptoms, not the cause. His previous Healer, whoever it was, was wise to leave the cause alone for someone that could actually tackle it,” Tom commented softly. He looked up at Harry. “Was he treated at St. Mungo’s?”

“No, a personal Healer. The Diggorys are wealthy. His Healer recommended the study because she’d heard about it through the grapevine. There’s a lot of chatter surrounding the success of the study,” Harry said. He didn’t need to tell Tom that. He was sure that the man felt the same amount of pressure as he did to make sure they succeeded, if not more than him.

“Hmm. I’d like to interview her as well. I’ll write her a letter,” Tom said, never looking up from Harry’s messy notes.

And then, very casually, he let his hand drop onto Harry’s thigh and squeezed once. Harry stiffened under the man’s touch and bit his lower lip, refusing to shiver at the heat of Tom’s hand.

Suddenly, Harry realized. They were alone.

They were very much alone.

The last time they were alone...things had happened.

“I...Tom,” Harry said, his voice trembling. His cheeks felt hot. Merlin, the sex had been...had been too good. “We need to talk.”

“Now, you want to talk?” Tom asked coolly. “Not three weeks ago?”

“There wasn’t *time.* We’ve had three patients die since the fundraiser,” Harry bit out, deflecting as best as he could. But, Harry was a Slytherin, and James and Sirius were right about one thing—Slytherins were cowards, through and through, and sometimes, Harry felt like the biggest coward in the world.

“We’ve had ample opportunity to have this conversation,” Tom said.

“We shouldn’t have had sex,” Harry blurted out.

Tom snorted. “And yet, we did. And it was good. I forgot how good you were at following directions. I forgot how good you take it. I forgot how sweet you sound when you beg. I forgot how hot and *tight* you are. You haven’t fucked anyone since me, have you?”

“That’s none of your business,” Harry said, tepid fury swirling in his chest. He crossed his arms over his chest and shoved Tom’s hand off his thigh. He practically jumped off of Tom’s desk and stormed away.

“You *are* my business—”

“Not anymore!” Harry snapped, his voice cracking. “You made that perfectly clear when you picked this project over *me*.”

“Bellatrix threatened me. But, she doesn’t have to know about—”

“I’m not doing that again, Tom. I’m not going to be your dirty little secret. Fuck you,” Harry hissed angrily.

Tom scoffed. “Don’t pretend that I’m not yours. It takes two to fuck and we fucked while you were on a date with another man.”

Harry stalked closer to Tom, his eyes narrowing. Tom didn't shift from his seat, only his hands tightening on the arms. Harry grabbed the back of the chair and swung it around, glowering down at the man. Tom stared up at him, daring him to respond.

Instead, Harry straddled the man’s lap, slowly settling down on Tom’s knees. Tom didn’t flinch.

“You used me. You saw me. With another man. Looking hot as all hell. Was I a game to you, Tom?” Harry asked, his expression like stone. Tom’s eyes narrowed at him, but he didn’t

respond right away. “Are you trying to make a fool of me?”

“It takes—”

“No,” Harry barked. “Because it’s fine. It’s fine for *you*. You never got that. It’s fine because you were established and you had nothing to prove. So it was fine. Until I got hurt. You don’t get to hurt me anymore.”

Tom’s hands slid down from the armchair, over Harry’s thighs, up to his waist. His broad hands tightened there and then, viciously, he tugged Harry forward. Harry adjusted, his knees coming up on either side of Tom’s legs. He looked down at Tom, his expression sharp.

“You’re ruining me,” Tom said quietly.

Harry’s expression crumpled and his head fell forward, his forehead pressed to Tom’s shoulder.

How did they get here?

“Why can’t...we can’t…” Harry whispered, his fingers shaking against Tom. “You’re like a bad drug habit, Tom Riddle. And you tell me we can’t be together, but you don’t want to let me go. And I keep...keep making *excuses* for you. No more.”

He tried to jerk out of Tom’s lap, but Tom’s hands held fast. He stared at Harry with a grimace and burgundy eyes that pulled Harry into pieces and examined his innards.

“May I kiss you?” he asked softly.

Harry didn’t say anything, only tilting his head to the side. Tom’s lips found his pulse, sucking a dark mark against the pale skin there. He could probably taste Harry’s heartbeat, and Harry revelled in having the man’s teeth dig right into the skin that protected his carotid artery. Tom could tear his throat out with his teeth.

And then, Harry stood up, backing away, his eyes narrowed on Tom. For the first time, Tom looked lost.

“Fuck you,” Harry whispered.

“What?”

“*Fuck* you,” Harry spat. “Fuck your self-destructive bullshit.”

“Pot. Kettle,” Tom hissed quietly, looking away.

Harry let out a mean laugh. “Maybe. But, at least, I acknowledge it. You love me, Tom Riddle. I’m the love of your life. You’re *never* gonna love anyone like you love me.”

Harry threw the door shut behind him.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry stumbled once on the top step of Number 12 Grimmauld Place. He steadied himself against the door, pressing his forehead into the cool wood. Then, he took a deep breath and tapped his wand once, unlocking it. As soon as he walked into the foyer, Hermione was upon him, swooping in with her teeth bared.

“We’ve already eaten!” she snarled under her breath, eyes mad. “It was so awkward, Harry.”

“Is he here? You had dinner with him?” Harry asked distractedly as he tore off his denim jacket and threw it over the horrific troll leg umbrella stand. They needed to throw that thing out. “What did you eat?”

“Indian. What else?” Hermione said scornfully. “He eats naan with a fork and knife. And then proceeded to regale us with tales about dining with Indian princesses. He’s so posh.”

“Don’t you love it?”

“I really don’t,” Hermione snapped. She crossed her arms, appearing more furious than Harry really thought the whole debacle warranted. He let out a long sigh. “Why didn’t you tell us you were going to be late? Or that he was coming in the first place? He just showed up at the doorstep into formal dress robes. As if we were some pureblood family instead of a poor student commune. It was—what is *that*?”

Her voice ended in a high hiss, barely audible. Harry froze when he felt the tip of her wand dig into his pulse point. He winced in pain as the area throbbed, and then he realized what it was.

A hickey.

“Nothing,” Harry said quietly, looking down at his feet.

Hermione stared at him with narrowed eyes. Very carefully, she whispered, “*Accio* bruise removal paste.”

He winced as he heard the little jar whistle through the air from their collective mini-pharmacy in the parlor. Hermione caught it with only the tiniest bit of a fumble. She leaned forward and very carefully smeared the thick, yellow paste on the dark red bruise. He felt his skin grow uncomfortably warm after a few minutes as the broken blood vessels began to mend and after the paste had done its work, he was sure that it just looked vaguely pink, like the color of new skin. He wiped at the sticky residue with the back of his hand. Hermione stared at him with a severe expression on her face.

“Don’t give me that look,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione didn’t say anything. Instead, she pointed towards the kitchen.

Harry sighed and walked past Hermione towards the kitchen. It felt like walking to his death. He paused in front of the swinging door, stood straighter and allowed a bright smile to spread across his face. He kicked the door open, taking in the scene before him.

Neville and Ron were still sitting at the table, their takeaway uncharacteristically unfinished. They were staring at Zabini with vaguely uncomfortable expressions on their faces. Neville looked up immediately and his face crumpled with relief.

“Harry, you’re here,” he said.

“I am,” Harry agreed. “Sorry that my day ran long. Patient interview.”

Zabini straightened up, very carefully putting his knife and fork down. He looked at Harry, raising an eyebrow. “I had no idea that you wore denim. It looks quite nice on you.”

Harry paused, his lips quirked into a confused smile. “Thank you?”

"Yes. You pull off common clothing quite well. You're quite the chameleon, Harry," Zabini said decidedly as if Harry had just proved something to him. Harry looked away, giving Ron a look. Ron hid a grin behind his hand.

“Nev, tell Harry what you did today,” Ron commanded.

Hermione snorted from behind Harry, edging around him and sitting in her own seat. Harry stood awkwardly behind his seat. He glanced at Blaise. Tom used to sit there, eating Harry’s shitty eggs. Tom. He should stop thinking about Tom.

“Astoria and I went to Hogwarts and taught sexual education. 20% of the fifth through seventh years had varying STIs,” Neville sighed, shaking his head with bemused amusement.

“Merlin,” Harry muttered. “They don’t teach sexual education, do they?”

"Not at all," Hermione confirmed. "But, I've read all about it all at the library and between my parents. There's a big book of magical STIs and interesting cases. It's absolutely fascinating. I wonder if I still have the name of it."

Harry hid a grin. Zabini’s nose was wrinkled in disgust. “I think you’re making our guest uncomfortable.”

Hermione looked over at him, eyes narrowed.

“We’re Healers. This is what we talk about,” she retorted. She looked at him, meaningfully. “I gave a man an enema because he ate six Cornish pixies—live. They refused to leave.”

Ron roared with laughter. Zabini looked positively *green.*

“This isn’t appropriate dinner table talk,” Zabini said, eyes wide. He glanced over at Harry from the corner of his eye. Harry sighed.

He could take a hint.

“Blaise, let me give you a tour,” Harry said.

Ron grinned. “Don’t forget the Silencing Charm.”

Harry flipped him the bird with one hand and pulled Zabini up with the other. Zabini looked intrigued—almost hungry now. He had so many faces that it sometimes threw Harry off. The man slid an arm around his waist and hugged him tight against him.

"Hello," he murmured, leaning down to press a kiss to each side of Harry's neck. His lips lingered on Harry's pulse point. Zabini pulled back. He hadn't seemed to notice anything.

Harry took his hand and pulled him from the kitchen, eyes trained ahead of himself. He didn’t say anything and for once, Zabini didn’t feel the need to say anything either. They walked up the stairs in silence and Harry pushed open the door to his room. He smiled up at Zabini, invitingly.

“Aren’t you going to fuck me?” Harry asked.

Zabini grinned and lunged.

And Harry proceeded to have, quite literally, the worst sex in his entire short life.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, world!

I’ve returned. It’s been longer than two weeks. Sorry about that. I just started my new internship and it’s just very time-consuming and exhausting though I love it. Anyway, here is the chapter. A lot of things happened. A lot of things didn’t happen. Romance. Drama. Medicine. Cedric. Wow, I really love Cedric. He is such a good dude. He doesn’t deserve any of the shit that canon and fandom puts him through.

Also, as for the sexual education aspect that I put in, if it bothers you, please don’t @ me. That’s my job during the school year. I’ve put as much of my actual experiences in there as I could while keeping it magical. So, it is what it is. I hope you had fun with it because I did. I’ve never been heckled while teaching except by my friends who came to one of my weekend workshops. It was quite funny, to be honest.

Anyway, here are my sources for this very special chapter/episode:

Harry and Tom’s Case:

Hearteater Virus:
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/75414046214/hearteater-virus-believed-by-some-healers-to-be

STIs:

Apparating Warts:
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/170887528052/apparating-warts-magical-sti-apparating-warts

Firecrotch:http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/170814871855/firecrotch-magical-sti-an-old-infection

Priapean Worm:
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/170923152794/priapean-worm-magical-sti-known-as-banana

Magicrabs:
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/166338493868/magicrabs-magical-sti-also-referred-to-as

All of these awesome ideas originated from @themonsterblogofmonsters. Thanks to her, also, for helping me develop a few plotlines and generally being an awesome sounding board when I need to ask for advice on an idea.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was dreaming.

It was a nice dream about an old Christmas at the Burrow filled with the scent of roast and pudding and boiled chestnuts. In his dream, he was not disappointed by the knitted sweater with the large ‘R’, and his parents clapped him on the back, proud as he regaled them about tales of plague masks and bringing men and women back from the brinks of Death. In his dream, he was twenty.

Ron.

In his dream, he was seven and he received his great-uncle’s old chessboard set and he had felt only a raucous sort of joy. He’d never smiled so hard.

Ron!

In his dream, a beautiful woman with smooth brown skin and spiraling curls sat at his side, fingers laced in his. In his dream, that beautiful woman was his wi—

“RON!”

Ron jerked out of his dream, rolling out of Hermione’s bed and fell onto the cold wooden floor with an unforgiving thump. He yelped, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Whuzzit?”

“The Patronus woke me up. What the fuck?” Hermione rasped, still sounding sleep-murderous-cute. Ron opened his eyes and looked at the Patronus poised at the end of their bed. It looked unimpressed, even for a Patronus.

The slender yet fearsome silver wolf opened its great mouth and Bellatrix Black’s voice echoed through the room. “*Get to St. Mungo's. We have a case. Wear your blacks."*

Ron was off the ground in less than a second and ran to the tiny space in Hermione's closet that she had given to him. Hermione sat up lazily in bed, readjusting the silk scarf wrapped around her head as she yawned into the crease of her elbow. She crossed her arms as she sat up against the headboard, displeased.

“*Tempus*,” she snarled, waving her wand just a little too sharply. “It’s four in the morning!”

“You have a shift soon anyway,” Ron said distractedly. He shucked off his pajamas and pulled out one of his several black robes and black trousers. He pulled it on fast, attempting to do up the buttons with his clumsy fingers before he finally gave up and ran back to his bedside table and fetched his wand. With a lazy flick of his wand, most of the buttons came

together and the ones that didn't, he finished up by hand. "Do you know where my boots are?"

"By the door, I can imagine," Hermione said, full of far too much snark for how early it was. "I could've slept for another twenty minutes, did you know?"

"Go back to sleep then, Mione."

"Too late. I'm up," Hermione sighed, sliding out of bed. She stretched her arms over her head, giving Ron a generous view of her bare stomach as her shirt rode up over the folded over waistband of her sleeping shorts. "I'll make breakfast and wake Neville up early too."

"Harry is almost done with a thirty-six hour shift. Leave him my portion of breakfast," Ron said. He swooped in after pulling on his socks and pressed a quick kiss to Hermione's lips. "Later."

Hermione bit her lip to keep from smiling but didn't quite succeed. "Later," she muttered back.

Ron bounded out of the room, practically tripping down the stairs and he fetched his black boots by the door, next to the God-awful troll leg umbrella stand that Harry really needed to get rid of. He pulled them on, not even bothering to lace them before he threw himself out of the door. He Disapparated just as he closed the door and didn't even mind the uncomfortable nature of Apparating. When he appeared in the Apparition Zone, he was met with a stone stare.

Bellatrix Black was waiting, draped in black robes, her mask already tied around her neck, hanging loosely and bouncing against her chest. In one arm, she had a basket full of all of the necessities. She passed it to Ron and he took it without comment.

"Weasley. Here. You've graduated," Bellatrix barked, tossing something else at Ron. Ron caught it and he looked down at the mask in hand with wide eyes. Bellatrix didn't wait to collect herself, instead pulling her hood over her head and securing her mask over her face.

Ron followed her example and pulled his wand. "Where?"

"I'll Side-Along you," Bellatrix said and she grabbed his arm, long nails digging into the soft flesh of his arm as they Disapparated. Ron squirmed in her grip as he went through the uncomfortable experience of being Side-Alonged. When they landed, Bellatrix's grip was the only thing that kept him from toppling over like a child. "Get your shit together, Weasley."

"It's together. I swear. Side-Alonging is just hard," Ron said, cheeks bright red from his mistake. Bellatrix looked unamused. She only raised her mask onto her face, tying it tight. Ron followed her example briskly and followed her as they entered the building.

It looked condemned, and not out of place in the far outskirts of London. The outside was surrounded by Aurors, which was strange; in Ron's experience, mediwizards were usually the first responders. And yet, the condemned building with the sagging wooden walk-up, was

spilling with Aurors who all looked grim-faced and vigilant. Guarding the door was a young Auror, more relaxed than the other stiff-backed squad, but still quite serious.

“Wotcher, Aunt Bella. Titan is down,” the Auror said as they caught sight of the pair of mediwizards. Ron only let himself be perturbed by her bright pink hair for just a moment.

“Thank you, Nymphadora,” Bellatrix said, her voice cold as she walked past the Auror that was apparently her *niece*. She was a grown woman. It suddenly struck Ron that he had no idea how old Bellatrix was. If she was old enough to be an aunt, then she really looked good for her age.

“Your niece?” Ron asked.

He couldn’t see Bellatrix’s expression but he could *feel* how unimpressed she was. "ABC," she said instead as she pushed through the barrier of Aurors. She rolled her up sleeves. "Titan is special. She's a hit wizard."

They walked up a long sagging staircase of rotting wood. It creaked and cracked under Ron’s feet and he prayed that he wouldn’t fall through before reaching the top. Even from where he was, he could hear the buzz and murmur of Aurors on the scene. He wondered what they would find up there if the Aurors were already there.

“Did she finish the job?” Ron muttered. He got his answer the moment he stepped into the rickety old room and saw the walls scorched by magical residue and a broken body slumped against the wall. It was impressive.

“She finished the job. She’s the best.”

Ron looked up and saw the grim face of Sirius Black. He was careful not to react. He wasn’t supposed to let them know who he was.

“Do I need to bring him back?” Bellatrix drawled.

"No," Sirius said. "She has a permanent license to exercise deadly force. If he's dead, she wants him to stay dead. Just take...take care of her. She's a friend of the family. I'll alert her husband after you stabilize her."

Bellatrix huffed and nodded as she proceeded forward into the room, pushing past the circle of Aurors that had established themselves as a barrier around their comrade. Ron jerked to a stop as he stared at the broken, damaged body that was being left to them. The Aurors had done rudimentary Healing, all superficial wounds, but it had been enough to keep her alive. Ron looked at her.

She probably had a kind face under the caked mask of blood. It was round and familiar. He couldn't tell what color her hair was, with the grime, but he thought it might be blonde. It was cropped close to her head in a pageboy haircut. Her legs were twisted strangely as if they had been snapped. Her wand was still in hand, clenched tight in her fist. Her torso was soaked in blood. But, the most terrifying thing was the way she *stared*.

She was unblinking.

Bellatrix lifted her chin. "Weasley. This is Alice Longbottom. Codename: Titan. Head of the hit wizards and the Ministry's most dangerous. Her death: not an option."

Alice Longbottom. Neville's *mum*.

"Not an option," Ron repeated immediately. He fell to his knees next to her, and pull out his wand. Bellatrix went to the other side of her and leaned down. "Diagnostics?"

"Yes. But, I know what's wrong with her. You fix her bones," Bellatrix said. She pulled her mask off, revealing her face. She looked as still as stone and he wondered how she was able to compartmentalize so well. "We'll need Albus for this. Now, no one move. Except you, Weasley. *Legilimens*."

Ron jerked back as Bellatrix jerked and her eyes went blank. Everyone was frozen. Ron swallowed. He wasn't supposed to be. He cast the diagnostics spell and winced as the information washed over him. *Lacerations to the abdomen, shattered hip, broken tibia, the Cruciatus—recurrent.* He pulled back and pressed his wand to her chest which rose weakly and fell.

Bellatrix jerked and looked up. "She's been tortured. Rundown," Bellatrix snapped.

"Lacerations to the abdomen. One mundane. One cursed. Shattered hip. Broken tibia. Recurrent Cruciatus."

"Not her worst. She's broken her spine before," Bellatrix said quietly.

"She's never been held under the Cruciatus for so long. What if she's…" Sirius trailed off. "People die from Cruciatus, Bella. They go mad and they *die*."

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "Fuck off."

"We can't put her in stasis," Ron said, softly. Bellatrix's eyes narrowed at him. "She's in pain, but Malfoy told me that stasis and coma spells put stress on the core. If we set her bones here without putting her in a coma, we'll kill her. If we do put her in a coma, we'll kill her. A trance is the best way. That's what Malfoy did for my brother. And the curse laceration can be sewn shut. Summon Hermione. She'll be able to do it, and she's awake. She won't have gone back to sleep, and we've got early shifts today. She'll be getting ready now."

Bellatrix hummed, processing the information. Finally, she nodded.

"Do it," Bellatrix commanded.

Ron pulled out his wand and shouted, "*Expecto Patronum*." The silvery Jack Russell Terrier leaped from the end of his wand. If it could yap loudly, he thought it would. It bounced with excitement. "*Dissero Patronae*. Hermione, meet me at the hospital immediately. Don't wait. We need you as soon as possible. I'll fetch you from the trainee quarters to explain."

Bellatrix hummed. "Draco has an early shift as well. You'll get both of them. Let's move."

DIAGNOSIS

“There’s an emergency patient coming in. A VIP, I heard,” Smith said in excited whispers. He cast suspicious looks all around the trainee room, and then looked back over at Patil. Draco rolled his eyes; it wasn’t as if he were being particularly quiet. “I saw a bunch of E&T running down the hall. I think one of them was Black.”

Draco hummed. He looked back down at his robes, smoothing his lapels and glancing at himself in the mirror. Quite carefully, he pressed a loose strand of blonde hair back into place, pleased with how well put together he was. He really was devastatingly handsome, wasn't he?

“Malfoy. Hermione.”

Draco looked up, wide-eyed, and he frowned at his Weasley. He stood in the doorway, breathing heavily, blood smeared and drying across his freckled jaw. His blue eyes darted over towards Granger and Longbottom before he looked back over at Draco.

“What is it, Weasley?” Draco asked quietly.

“I have a VIP patient. She’s going into procedure now and she needs both of your skills,” Weasley said carefully. He looked over at Longbottom, a peculiar expression on his face. “It’s Titan.”

Longbottom reacted immediately.

His face turned so pale that Draco was afraid that he might pass out. Granger’s brow furrowed.

“Titan?” she repeated.

“No, it’s not,” Longbottom said, his voice surprisingly steely. “It’s not her.”

“I saw her, Neville. We’re stabilizing her right now, and she needs to keep stable before we open her up. Hermione, you need to be ready. Let’s go. Now,” Weasley said. He paused and looked over at Draco with narrowed eyes. “You too, Malfoy. Dumbledore’s been Summoned.”

Unlike Granger, Draco didn’t hesitate. He darted forward towards Weasley, Granger just a few seconds behind. He glanced over his shoulder. Longbottom looked lost and Astoria was immediately at his side, grabbing at his hand, and stroking it gently, attempting to comfort him. Abbott glared and then faltered when she saw the expression on Longbottom’s face. Draco turned away and followed Weasley from the room.

“Who is Titan?” Draco said, carefully pronouncing that last unfamiliar word.

Granger's brow was furrowed in confusion. And then, she gasped. "His mum or dad?" she demanded, brown eyes blazing.
Weasley faltered.

"What do you mean?" Draco snapped, irritation rising. They both knew something that he didn't and he *hated* it.

"Neville's father is an Auror. His mother is a hit wizard. Mother or father, Ron?" Granger whispered, eyes darting around. Everyone watched Weasley as if he were a dementor. Everyone knew that a mediwizard was the last defense—the last guard of life before death snuck in and snuffed out a light. Weasley continued staring straight ahead as they took the stairs down to the magical theatres. Finally, when he was sure they were alone in the stairwell, he answered.

"His mother. Titan. She was on a mission. She finished her objective, but there's extensive damage. Lacerations to the abdomen, shattered hip, broken tibia, and a recurrent Cruciatus," Weasley summarized. Granger gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, before she steeled herself and nodded, walking just a little faster.

"The lacerations are due to a curse, I presume?" she asked. "That's why you called me?"

"Yes. I thought you could sew it closed. I know it'll still scar, but you're the only one I know that handles cursed Dark wounds," Weasley said quietly. "We don't know if it's a spell or some Summoned creature, so I didn't call Spell Damage. I just thought…"

"It's fine. Just get me unicorn hair and a needle and I can do it," Granger said brusquely. She looked less frazzled than she had only minutes again. "I can't promise it won't scar. We were treating Lavender's wound for a long time. Getting rid of the Dark magic like it was an infection. I'm sure that played a part."

"We don't need to it to be perfect. We need her alive," Weasley said.

Granger nodded. She caught a glimpse of Draco again, and her lips curled into a sneer of distaste. He sneered back.

"Why...*him*?" she asked.

"Because of the Cruciatus," Weasley admitted.

"Dumbledore isn't enough?" Granger asked.

Draco huffed. "He Summoned me, because he remembers what I did for his brother. You want me to put him in a trance," Draco noted as they walked out onto the magical theatre floor. He caught sight of his mentor almost immediately

Albus looked far grimmer than usual.

"That's correct, Mr. Malfoy," Albus said when the three trainees met him at the door of the magical theatre. "Are you ready?"

Granger was the one that answered for all of them. “Ready.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Good morning, by the way,” Harry said under his breath as they emerged from Cedric’s room together. He glanced over at Tom. The man didn’t say anything just yet, looking down at his notes instead. “Cedric is improving.”

“I suppose,” Tom admitted. “The cocktail we have him on makes his symptoms nearly nonexistent. But, that just means we don’t know what to treat.”

“I think we should open him up and remove the teeth by hand,” Harry said. “It would give him more time.”

“Not enough. What if two sprout up in its place?” Tom countered.

“Well, right now, we’re trying to borrow time so that we can come up with an *actual* solution. We need to hypothesize—”

"Have you fucked him? Zabini?" Tom interrupted.

Harry blanched.

“Are you fucking serious?” he said, his voice strangely still as he stared up at Tom. “You don’t get to call me—”

"You know that's not why I'm asking. I'd never call you a whore," Tom said, voice just as clipped. He was still looking down at his notes like they were the most interesting thing in the world. "You can say it's none of my business."

“It’s none of your business.”

“Alright.”

"Alright."

There was a long beat of uncomfortable silence.

"What about transforming the curse?" Harry asked.

Tom looked intrigued. “Interesting. It’s a virus made from a curse that acts like a Transfiguration spell gone wrong. It could be done. But, not with just magic alone. And we’ll want to go about this non-invasively. The Hearteater Virus doesn’t react well when exposed. The evidence is there,” Tom pointed out when Harry raised his eyes to argue. Harry couldn’t argue with that. Though there had been very few actual case files about the Hearteater Virus,

it did say that the infected heart would often try to protect itself, attempting to bite the Healers if they went within touching distance.

"So, a steady cocktail of potions," Harry muttered under his breath. He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Potions are fine if I have instructions. I'm not...the best at theory."

“I know the theory. But, we could consult with…” Tom trailed off, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

Harry huffed. "No, we're not consulting my mother. She doesn't even have the clearance to know shit about what we're doing. She's not even an active Healer. No," Harry said firmly.

Tom nodded. "Agreed. We don't have the time to get clearance for her anyway," he said, dismissing the idea entirely. "But, truly, it's the Transfiguration part. You can't...*transfigure* a curse. If one could, I don't know how."

He looked annoyed by the fact that he didn't know something. Harry smiled. It was cute.

“McGonagall?” Harry suggested.

Tom pursed his lips. “I suppose. Minerva isn’t my biggest fan,” Tom said. He sounded so disgruntled by the fact that someone wasn’t utterly charmed by him that it made Harry grin into his hand. Tom’s eyes narrowed at him in a glare. “Well, it’s no fault of mine.”

“Why do you say that like it’s my fault?” Harry laughed, shaking his head.

“Because it is. Before you, Minerva held a certain regard for me. At least, she thought me capable. Now, every time she looks at me, it’s scathing. You drive me to do terribly out of character things like pulling you into my lap in a back garden where anyone could see,” Tom accused, eyes narrowed.

“So, I’m the reason for your poor impulse control? I’m honored,” Harry teased, and suddenly, they felt like they had when everything had been...well not innocent, but not quite as complicated as it was now. There was a sense of respect, and perhaps all of that glowing mindless admiration Harry had had for Tom was gone, but it was replaced with a sense of camaraderie that felt twice as good.

“You’re the reason for a lot of things,” Tom muttered unhelpfully. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Won’t you ask Minerva for me?”

“She doesn’t like me either, Tom. She thinks you give me special treatment. Gave me special treatment,” Harry amended.

Tom snorted rather ungracefully. “Harry, she thinks I’m a twat. Please just ask McGonagall.”

“Ask me what?”

Both men nearly flinched, looking up so sharply that the sound of Harry's neck cracking echoed. He whined in pain, rubbing at the sore spot. McGonagall stared at the pair of them, her expression frightfully unimpressed.

“Minerva, we need your help with a patient. We can’t tell you much of anything. But, any assistance you can provide would be helpful,” Tom said in short clipped sentences. And then, he followed up his request that really sounded more like a demand with a charming smile.

“I don’t have time for your patient,” McGonagall barked, unimpressed. “I barely have time to save my own.”

Tom slid forward, eyes bright with cunning. “How can we assist you with that?”

Harry experienced a sinking feeling.

“Tom…” Harry warned quietly.

McGonagall looked suspicious, but she nodded. “I mourn the days when I had students to assist me in research.”

“Now, you do,” Tom said immediately. “Harry, assist Minerva.”

And for a moment, Harry really considered confessing to both McGonagall and Tom that he hadn’t slept in a day, not truly. He considered telling them that he was repressing his exhaustion so much that it felt bone deep. And then, he realized—he could save *two* patients.

Harry pasted the best smile he could on his face.

“Got it,” he said. “What do you need of me, Healer McGonagall?”

McGonagall pursed her lips, looking at him as if she could see right through the facade. She probably could. Harry just smiled harder.

“Very well,” she decided. “I have a patient that’s suffering from the Eye-Burning Curse.”

Harry winced. “And they’re not dead yet?”

“Not under my watch,” McGonagall said, a steely look entering her eyes. “I’ve slowed down the process, but it’s now clear that the eyes can’t be saved. I need you to go to the library, find similar cases where the spell damage is done to the eye, and the patient survived. Go.”

“Got it. What about...Mr. Diggory?” Harry asked, glancing over at Tom.

"We have notes that I must go through. I'll share some preliminary facts with Minerva," Tom said. If McGonagall took issue with that, she said nothing. She only passed Harry her notes, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“Potter, I’d like to see results within the day,” McGonagall said sharply.

“Got it,” Harry responded with a wink. McGonagall rolled her eyes, long-suffering.

Harry nodded at the pair and took off down the hallway, single-mindedly heading for the library. With a tap of his wand, the gated doors swung open, unlocking for the day. It spoke to how ungodly the time was that he was the first in the library. Harry perused the shelves,

plucking down any and all past cases concerning spell damage to the eye. The Conjunctivitis Curse, the Eye-Plucking Curse, a Summoning Spell gone awry, and finally a single Eye-Burning Curse case. He followed that up with a large encyclopedia *The Cursed Book*, smirking at how hokey the name sounded

Harry paused when he saw a few files on varying spell damage cases to the heart and made sure to grab those as well. Once his pile of books extended to his chin, he let it fall to a table with a loud thump and sat down, quickly getting to work.

For the first hour or so, he felt re-energized at the prospect of saving *two* patients.

It didn't take long for his eyelids to grow heavy again, and for his breathing to grow deeper. As exhaustion crept over, his notes grew sloppier, the quill sliding unforgivably across the parchment. He nearly passed out when he heard his name.

"Harry."

Harry jerked into an upward position, lifting his head from the cradle had made of his arm. "What?"

"Harry," Astoria repeated, her voice calm. Her hands were clasped behind her back, but she looked more edge than usual, despite her voice. "Come, Neville needs you."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean? What's going on?" he asked, even as he began to close his books, separating the finished cases into one pile, the useless ones in another, and the ones he would keep to the right. He slid his notes in with the cases he would keep. "Is he okay? Is he hurt?"

Harry stood up, alarmed when Astoria didn't speak immediately.

"I am not supposed to tell you. She is a VIP but...Neville needs us," Astoria said, as if she were convincing herself to break the rules. "The mediwizards brought Alice Longbottom in this morning. She's in the magical theatre."

DIAGNOSIS

Harry stood by the glass, looking down into the theatre from the gallery, his eyes tracking the Healers' movements. Hermione's head was bent over her word, her fingers moving nimbly as she finished her stitches. Vance stood opposite Harry, watching carefully, and nodding, murmuring to herself. She took a step back.

"She's doing well. When she's finished, send her to me," Vance said. She turned away, seemingly satisfied with what she'd witnessed.

"Yes, Healer," Harry agreed readily. The woman left the gallery, her perfect brown curls bouncing around her face. She cut a striking figure despite the unflattering color of the lime

green robes. Harry could see why Ron might've been attracted to her.

"She is going to live, Neville. She is. She has the best in there with her," Astoria said softly, running her fingers through Neville's hair. Neville's head rested on her shoulder, and he was staring blankly at the floor.

Harry didn't think he'd cried yet.

The door was thrown up again and Hannah burst through the door, eyes wide. She looked over at Astoria and Neville. Harry winced, ready for Hannah's typical tirade about women and/or men coming onto her boyfriend. It didn't come.

Hannah was immediately on Neville's other side, grabbing his hand. She leaned over, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"I got us some time," Hannah said, wide-eyed. "You get the next round of patients. You have about a half-hour before I have to go again."

"I will go after you. What did Luna say?" Astoria asked.

Hannah gave a sad smile. "She said Alice is one of ours because Neville is one of ours. It's okay."

"You both should be working," Neville said dully. He looked up and over at Harry. "You should be sleeping."

"I'm not tired," Harry retorted immediately.

"Then, if you're not tired, you should be Healing," Neville countered.

Harry huffed and pointed to his work sitting on his chair. "I will in a second. Let me just…" he muttered, looking back down into the theatre.

Hermione was sealing her stitches, the cursed wound now just a livid red gash sealed over with silvery threads. Ron and Bellatrix had just finished setting bones, carefully pumping and pouring potions in Alice Longbottom's mouth. Harry recognized the Skele-gro and Blood-Replenishing Potions. He wondered if they were type O or her blood type—with a cursed wound like that, a potion tailored to her blood type would work best.

Harry finally pulled himself away from the glass as Hermione and Ron stepped back, pulling bloody gloves off their hands and discarding them on the silver tray, hovering beside the operating slab. He sat down heavily in his chair but didn't open his notes, waiting instead for Hermione and Ron.

He didn't have to wait longer than three minutes. They burst into the gallery. Ron stopped briefly to squeeze Harry's shoulder before he went straight for Neville.

Neville seemed more alert instantly. "How's she doing now? Is she okay?"

“The curse wounds will heal,” Hermione said immediately, and then she looked at Ron for further information. “I don’t know much about the case. I just did what I was told.”

“Vance wants you,” Harry added.

Hermione nodded. “I’ll go to her in a minute.”

“I can’t...I can’t talk about it,” Ron muttered. He sighed, shaking his head. “It was...it was brutal. I wanted to do more for her. I healed her bones, and I made sure she was...she’s at least...fuck, Neville, I’m sorry.”

Neville frowned, opening his mouth to speak.

“Weasley.”

Hermione and Ron looked up, wide-eyed. Bellatrix was staring down at him, her purple lips curled back in a sneer. Harry’s eyes widened. He hadn’t noticed her entering the gallery—how tired *was* he?

“Mediwizard Black,” Ron said quietly.

“You did your job. You did it well. You were enough,” Bellatrix said.

In that moment, Harry decided that Bellatrix was a tired woman. She looked exhausted, dark circles like bruises blooming under her eyes, and a wane twist to her mouth. He realized that she looked so pale and colorless because she wasn't wearing her customary purple lipstick. She looked naked without it. She tucked her hair behind her ears and nodded as if reaffirming her words.

“There’s nothing else we can do?” Ron asked weakly. He glanced over at Neville who still looked silent and pale from where he was tucked between Hannah and Astoria.

“Nothing else. Granger sewed up her curse wounds—I’ll be sure to mention that to Vance, she’ll be pleased—and you came up with a quick, efficient plan. You kept her alive. That’s enough,” Bellatrix said sharply. She cleared her throat, smoothing her black robes and swallowed a yawn. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to sleep. Wake me up in 6 hours or if she starts to crash.”

Neville flinched at the very idea but didn't say anything as Bellatrix walked towards the door. She stopped in the doorway, looking down at Neville as he continued to stare out of the gallery glass.

"I won't let her die," Bellatrix said, and then she continued out of the door as if she hadn't said anything at all. Neville blinked, looking up at her wide-eyed.

“Has anyone called my da?” Neville whispered into the tense silence.

Ron swallowed. "That's...yeah, we did. He's on assignment though. He's out of the country if you didn't—"

“I did,” Neville interrupted, so unlike him. “He’s guarding the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. They have an agreement. If the other gets hurt in the line of duty while they’re on assignment, you finish the assignment. It was like that before I was born, and then, again, after I reached my majority. He won’t come until he’s done.”

Hannah and Hermione looked horrified at the prospect. Neville curled inward, hiding from their outrage.

“Sounds like my parents,” Harry said helpfully. Neville looked up at him. “If my dad was on assignment, my mom would stay. Vice versa. But, sometimes, if they couldn’t help it, if my dad was injured while doing something Auror-ish, my mother would stay where she was. We had Sirius and Remus to help out.”

“I had my Gran. Even though my mum doesn’t really like her,” Neville said with a nervous smile.

“She’ll be okay,” Harry whispered.

Hermione nodded. “I’ll be back to check in soon. I’ve got...I have to finish something up with Vance.”

“Thanks, Mione,” Neville said.

Hermione leaned down, pressing a kiss to Neville’s forehead before she went to Harry. Harry lifted his hand, lacing their fingers together and squeezing. Hermione stared down at him, reaching forward to rub her thumb against the dark circles under Harry’s eyes.

“You need to sleep,” she said softly. “Don’t make me Stun you.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” Harry retorted.

Hermione sighed, dropping his hand. “Oh, Harry.”

She left after, Ron trailing after her. Harry glanced back at the glass. It was only Dumbledore and Malfoy. Astoria pulled out a pocket watch, checked the time and she released Neville's hand, unwillingly. She stood, stretching her arms over her head. Her spine cracked audibly. Astoria quickly walked up to the glass, frowning and she sighed.

“Draco, *mon amour*,” she whispered to the glass. “If you don’t save her, I’ll never forgive you.”

Draco looked up at Astoria at that moment, as if he’d heard her. His expression was solemn and he nodded once. Astoria left without another word.

DIAGNOSIS

“It’s so close to being done,” Emmeline whispered to herself as the pair looked through the second-to-last draft of their paper. Each piece of parchment hung on the wall, marked with different colored ink. 37 neat pages of parchment. The final 8 pages sat on the desk, untouched and unfinished. “What time is she getting here?”

“She should be here any moment,” Hermione said. “I personally owled her. I didn’t think Healer Evans would approve.”

“Lily knows the importance of this paper,” Emmeline pressed. “But, I do admit...she’s been quite protective of Lavender, hasn’t she?”

“Wouldn’t you be?” Hermione challenged. Emmeline nodded and went back to her seat, fiddling to arrange the three cups of tea, ready for the moment their interview subject came to tie up the loose ends. “I can’t believe I’m going to be published in the Annual Review of Magical Medicine.”

“I can’t believe it either,” Emmeline sighed, shaking her head. A wry smile crossed her face. “I’m almost jealous of you.”

“Of me?” Hermione asked, staring at Emmeline with a frown.

"Yes. You're so young and already being published. You're in a class of trainees that all match your potential. When I was a trainee, I was the only woman, you know. And it was hard being the only woman and better than everyone else. I got complacent for a long time. I stopped striving. And then, once I became a Department head, I suddenly felt like I was competing against my peers. Competition is exciting when it's healthy," Emmeline said, almost wistfully. She shook her head, brushing away old thoughts. She nodded towards the door when they heard the telltale rhythmic knock of one Lavender Brown-Potter.

Hermione walked towards the door, opening it.

“Hello!” Lavender said with a grin. Her lavender cane was still in hand, wrapped in silk flowers. Lily stood just behind her, a grim expression on her face.

"Lavender! Healer Evans, what a surprise," Hermione said, only barely keeping her stammer in check. Lily Evans was a terrifying woman, tall and serious and altogether intimidating. Lily's hand was slowly brushing through her daughter's curls.

“You have your cane today, Lavender?” Emmeline asked from behind her desk.

“Mum insisted,” Lavender sighed, looking put out.

“And wasn’t I right?” Lily chided gently, her tone mismatching the deadpan expression on her face. “Physical therapy was particularly brutal today.”

“Oh, really?” Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lavender sighed. "Core strength building and balance again. I was trying to balance on a broomstick. It hurt like hell," Lavender admitted as she walked into the room. Hermione

frowned at her slight limp. Lavender noticed. "No, I don't usually limp, I swear! Right, Mum?"

“She does not,” Lily admitted. “She just needs ice and rest. I told her to reschedule but she said that she swore that she was going to do the interview today.”

“I appreciate your time, Lavender, Healer Evans,” Emmeline said earnestly. She waved at the two seats across from her desk and Hermione took her spot in the chair right next to her, quill ready to dictate the conversation at hand.

“How’s Won-Won, by the way, Hermione?” Lavender asked slyly.

Lily rolled her eyes.

“ ‘Won-Won’?” Hermione drawled, frowning.

“Ron. Weasley. That tall, pale, freckly glass of water that you call a boyfriend,” Lavender said, eyes glowing.

Hermione snorted uncontrollably. Emmeline threw back her head and laughed.

“Merlin…” Lily drawled, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“He’s doing quite well, thanks,” Hermione said with an amused smile. “I’ll let him know that you said hello.”

“Better not,” Lavender said with a quick shake of her head. “You don’t want him to be aware of your competition. I might just swoop in and steal your man, Hermione.”

Emmeline’s laughter turned into actual cackles.

Hermione hummed, fighting her grin. “You are *certainly* Harry’s little sister,” Hermione huffed. She turned to Emmeline, waiting for the older woman to get herself under control before they proceeded with the task at hand.

“Okay. Okay. Hermione, are you ready?” Emmeline asked between giggles. Hermione nodded, her quill in hand, already dipped in the fine black ink that she had saved for the occasion. “Lavender, how are you?”

Lavender’s eyes widened at the question. “I thought this was a post-procedure interview. Not therapy.”

“Really, Lavender. Please answer the question,” Lily said with an amused shake of her head.

“Right. I’m...fine,” Lavender said, drawing out the word as if she weren’t sure it was the right one. She amended her statement and said, “I am better.”

“ ‘Better’ than?” Emmeline pushed.

“Better than before. I still have nightmares, but not as often. Sometimes, my voice is a little rusty, like it was when I was first able to talk again. I don’t feel as much pain anymore. I don’t really notice the scars very much. I’ve thought about putting makeup on them, but my therapist said that I should only wear makeup if I want to. Not because I feel shame or anything. I was ashamed. At first, I think,” Lavender said with a shrug. She leaned back in her chair, fiddling with the top of her cane. “But, you know that.”

“No, we don’t,” Hermione said swiftly. “We’re your physical Healers. Your mind Healer is perfectly within their and your rights to keep that information to themselves.”

"If you wish to share it, you can," Emmeline said, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice. Lavender shrugged and Emmeline squeed under her breath. She took a deep breath, attempting to affect the appropriate Healer tone. "Okay. Besides the obvious emotional and mental side effects of your attack, how would you describe the physical aftermath?"

“Painful,” Lavender said, shortly. “It was hard. The scars twinged if I wasn’t constantly slathering Scar-Diminishing Serum. Not because there *was*much scarring, but because it *hurt*. The stitches would burn sometimes.”

“That’s good to know,” Emmeline said solemnly. She glanced over at Hermione, but Hermione was already scrawling out Lavender’s words as fast as a Quick-Quotes Quill. “And now?”

“Sometimes, my skin feels tight. Mum says that’s normal—new skin and scars pull. She makes me a special paste thing?” Lavender said, looking over at Lily uncertainly.

Lily hummed. “She’s allergic to Flobberworm mucus. I use a base of Puffapod seeds.”

“Aren’t Puffapod seeds used in fertility potions?” Hermione asked.

Lavender looked alarmed. “Mum, are you pumping me with more *estrogen*?”

“Merlin, no, Lavender,” Lily said, rolling her eyes. “I use moths to neutralize the effects. It’s used for consistency’s sake. Rose quartz treats any lingering Dark magic as well. Unicorns bring light, but there are always shadows. I’ll gladly owl the recipe to you.”

“We’d really appreciate it,” Emmeline said. She was good at masking her annoyance, but Hermione could see it there. Lily was treating her patient and hadn’t told her about it. Hermione would be annoyed too.

“Is that bad for me? For recovery?” Lavender asked, too perceptive for her own good.

“No, it’s not. I just wish I’d known sooner,” Emmeline said firmly.

Lily didn’t look apologetic, simply staring back at Emmeline with a blank expression.

“Moving on…” Hermione drawled. “Do you see any other adverse effects? Something that’s different in your behavior from before the attack?”

Lily let out a sharp bark of laughter. Emmeline and Hermione looked at her alarmed. Lavender's lips curled into a wide grin.

"Oh, I forgot you hadn't told them," Lily said, shaking her head. She was actually *smiling*. It was a terrifying sight. It made her look softer, and Hermione hadn't ever pictured Lily capable of softness.

"I'm faster. My eyesight is better. I sometimes sleepwalk. When the full moon comes around, I get...*aggressive*," Lavender rattled off.

Lily sniffed. "Understatement. You attacked Sirius because he smelled...unfamiliar."

"Unfamiliar? Can you distinguish scents?" Hermione asked, excitedly.

"Not really. I just know when it's someone I can trust. Someone I know. This was before I really got to understand the smell thing. Sirius smelled like another wolf. Sirius smelled like *Remus*," Lavender explained, sniffing.

"She hit him with her cane because she was still in too much pain to move. Remus came and they growled for a bit, and then she called him 'Alpha' and she settled," Lily explained.

"So, you fall into more animalistic instincts close to the full moon. *Fascinating*," Emmeline breathed. "Do you transform?"

"Ha, no," Lavender giggled. "I eat...meat. A lot of meat. Very *rare* meat."

Hermione laughed. "You're fucking brilliant. Medical marvel."

Lily brushed Lavender's hair from her face, with such fondness that Hermione's grin widened.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry looked between his notes as he rode the lift back up to the Spell Damage floor. The Eye-Burning Curse and the Hearteater Virus were strangely similar—both attacks on the organ that worked outwards to destroy the surrounding areas. While the Eye-Burning Curse typically spread to the brain, making a victim of the cursed being, the Heart-Eater Virus caused the heart to consume itself and the lungs. Effectively, the heart and eyes were already dead, having turned against their hosts, but the magic ate on.

A way to maximize the torture.

"Whoever came up with this shit is fucking evil," Harry hissed under his breath.

He ignored the uncertain looks from the visitors, Healers, and other matrons stuffed into the lift with him. He was pressed tightly against the back corner and he hated it. The air stank of

sour bodies and the strange, cool sterility of the hospital. While one scent comforted him, the smell of body odor definitely dispelled any sort of comfort he might've gotten. He should've waited to take the next lift.

He looked back at his notes.

Harry sighed. Everything would be made easier if he could just...just...bring shit back to life or whatever. Except, that wasn't done, obviously. Not when it was already ruined, Transformed into something terrible. Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration spoke to how ruined dead things couldn't be Transfigured *back*, only changed again. Always moving forward.

The young Healer smirked. Necromancy would make his job so much easier if true Necromancy existed. He shook his head as some of the other occupants of the lift filed out onto other floors, finally clearing the way for him until only he and another matron remained.

"You're Potter, aren't you?" the matron asked.

Harry nodded with a smile. "Yes, I am."

"You work with Strout and her pet Healer," the matron snorted to herself.

"Is that what they call him?" Harry asked with a wide grin.

The matron hummed. "She can reign him in, can't she? She's been with him since his first case. She'll stick with him until his last, I expect. She's a tough old bird."

"She is," Harry agreed. The lift doors opened again and the two walked out onto the Spell Damage floor. The matron turned the other way with a nod. "Wait! What's your name?"

"Pansy."

Harry nodded and turned in the opposite direction, going towards Cedric's room. He knocked lightly on the door and pushed the door open. He stopped in the doorway, surprised by the scene in front of him.

Amos was in Cedric's room again—that was unsurprising. Amos was *always* in Cedric's room, even when Tom and Harry said not to be. The man was a natural busybody, poking around the hospital, poking out his chest and reminding everyone he was on the Board. When he wasn't, he was harassing Tom and Harry for updates even though they constantly reminded him that they weren't under no legal obligation to tell him anything, seeing as his son was *of age.*

However, Blaise Zabini sitting in the chair next to Amos *was* surprising. And quite unwelcome.

Harry's mood soured.

He had an unfortunate war flashback to the night only last week in which Harry had had the worst sex in his life—something that he had tried so hard to forget.

But, every time that he looked at Zabini's smug expression, he thought about how the man hadn't been able to nail his prostate even *once*, Harry hadn't come, and right after, Zabini had landed on top of him and fallen asleep. Harry had had to push him off, and *out* of him and then had gone to jerk off in the bathroom. When he'd returned, Zabini was still passed out, face down in his bed.

Harry had been *humiliated*.

"Healer," Cedric said with a quiet smile. The constant tension between his eyebrows seemed to have eased.

So, he wasn't flaring up. That was good. Harry smiled blandly.

"Cedric, Mr. Diggory. Mr. Zabini," Harry said with a quick nod to each man.

Zabini pouted even as Amos chortled loudly, elbowing Zabini in the side with a knowing look. Harry flushed.

"No need to be so formal on our account, eh?" Amos chuckled.

"Dad…" Cedric chastised softly. Amos raised his hands in surrender, but he was still smirking.

Harry lifted his chin. "How are you feeling, Cedric?"

"Better than this morning. Not even a twinge," Cedric said with a smile.

"I'm glad your symptoms are easing even if the potions are...a problem," Harry said, taking a while to figure out the right word.

Amos straightened. "A problem?" he demanded.

"I told you, Dad. I'm building a resistance. They're just going to change what I'm taking," Cedric said, cutting off his father's tirade before it even truly began. He looked over at Harry, patiently waiting for him to explain.

"I'm glad you remembered that from this morning. You were half-asleep," Harry said with a small smile. He turned to Amos. "Mr. Diggory, we're working on a possible solution to the problem now rather than simply treating the symptoms. We're making good progress—"

"What kind of progress?" Amos asked.

Zabini was still watching Harry as if he wanted to take him to bed. It made Harry feel oily. He rolled his shoulders back, taking a centering breath, as he carefully didn't look at Zabini.

"I can't tell you exactly, but we have a few ideas," Harry said. He hoped he wasn't lying—he *hoped* Tom had *some* idea. Maybe there'd be a spark of inspiration once Harry presented him with something. Once again, he felt that bone-deep exhaustion and he repressed the urge to yawn, gritting his teeth hard so it came out as a shuddering breath.

“I want to know some of these ideas,” Amos snapped.

Cedric frowned, his hands knotting in his blankets. Harry could see the anxiety in his eyes.

Zabini leaned forward. “Come now, Harry. Why don’t you share with the class?”

“Mr. Zabini, you don’t have clearance for that,” Harry barked. Zabini sat back, seemingly taken aback by Harry’s tone. “Mr. Diggory, you’re here because your son signed papers saying you could be. But, *he* is the only one that is allowed to request ideas, and I’m not in the business of presenting half-arsed plans to my patients. When we present, we will present a fully-formed plan.”

“You can’t talk to me that—” Amos snarled, beginning to stand.

“Yes, I can, if you’re affecting my patient!” Harry snapped. Almost immediately, Amos looked at his son and then settled back down in his chair, patting Cedric’s leg.

“I’m sorry about that Ced. I’m just worried,” Amos said quietly. “You’re all I’ve got.”

“And you’re all I’ve got, Dad. Just let Harry do his job,” Cedric implored. He looked over at Zabini, a twist to his lips. Zabini sighed, holding his hands up.

“Alright, alright, Ced. I’ll stop,” Zabini said with a lazy grin. How hadn’t Harry noticed how *smarmy* the man was?

Zabini stood, smoothing down his gaudy robes and he sauntered around the bed.

“Mr. Zabini,” Harry said coldly.

Zabini smirked. “Healer,” he greeted before he swooped down, pressing a kiss to Harry’s lips. Harry jerked back, wand held aloft and pointed at Zabini’s sternum.

“I am working,” Harry said coldly.

Zabini's eyes widened as if surprised by how fast Harry had pulled his wand. He lifted his hands in surrender and slunk from the room. The tension remained even after he left. Amos no longer looked like he found Zabini funny at all. In truth, he looked a little sick.

“I’m sorry about that,” Harry said quietly. “That was unprofessional. It won’t happen again.”

Cedric shook his head, his brown eyes hard. “Don’t be sorry. I’ve known Blaise forever. He’s a git.”

Amos didn’t say anything, looking down at Cedric’s hand instead.

“I’ll have a plan for you soon, Cedric. Just...hold on, okay?” Harry asked weakly. Cedric nodded with a smile. Harry turned to Amos. “Mr. Diggory?”

Amos looked up. “Yes?”

“I am doing everything in my power to save your son. My sister...my sister was seriously injured last Christmas. I know how it feels to watch the person you’re closest to slowly slip away. I *know*. I am doing everything in my power to save your son,” Harry repeated.

And Amos Diggory looked at him like he believed him.

“Okay,” Amos said.

Harry nodded once and quickly left the room. Zabini was standing up against the wall, a grim expression on his face.

“Harry, I’m sorry. That was uncalled—”

“No,” Harry said softly. “You talked to my patient and his family about me. About personal details about me. And you just...*embarrassed* me in front of my patient. Don’t. I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

He didn’t say, *I don’t like you enough for this shit*.

“Harry, I’m sorry. Let me take you to...let me take you to lunch? How’s Thursday?” Zabini implored. He leaned forward. Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Come on, Harry. Don’t we have fun together?”

Harry resisted the urge to snort. *No.*

“Lunch on Thursday. I’ll talk to you then. Don’t owl me,” Harry said coldly.

As he walked away and back to Neville and the rest of his notes, he thought about Thursday.

He was going to go to lunch.

And he was going to dump the *shit* out of Blaise Zabini.

DIAGNOSIS

"It's not just the Cruciatus," Draco whispered from where he sat, legs folded beneath him. He ran his hair through Alice's short blonde hair again, smoothing away the furrow between her brows. Her open eyes were glazed, and she blinked every few minutes, so slow that it was almost like she were dead rather than in a trance.

“No, it is not, my boy. What would you say it is?” Albus asked, quite grave. He was circling the pair of them, eyes never moving away. Draco hummed.

“The Madness Curse. Whoever did this thought himself *clever*,” Draco murmured. “Madness Curse and then applying the Cruciatus. While the madness burns, we would be more preoccupied with the nerve damage and scars left by the Cruciatus.”

“They were very clever,” Albus sighed and he looked quite old then. “What do you say to that?”

“I am *cleverer*,” Draco said spitefully. He straightened up again, rubbing his thumbs against the temples of Alice Longbottom’s head. “You can tear it from the root. It’s like a weed. You can’t cut the top off. You don’t treat the symptoms. You treat the cause. I don’t have enough control to do it.”

It hurt to admit that, but it was true. He wasn’t skilled enough yet to keep Alice in the trance while delving into her mind, searching for where the Madness had decided to root itself deep.

“First, we must find where the Madness has grown from. Legilimency will assist us with this. Once we know, this is where the work truly begins,” Albus said. The twinkle was missing from his blue eyes. When it was gone—that genial comfort—only fury remained. It was something Draco could relate to. It made Albus seem more human.

“How so?”

“We will be dealing with a two-fold problem. The Cruciatus and the Madness Curse, as you stated. Tell me more about what you know of the Cruciatus Curse,” Albus prompted.

Draco nearly sighed. Albus always asked questions that he knew the answer to. Draco assumed that the point was to get Draco answer, for his ‘education’, of course. Then, Albus would fill in the blanks. It only reminded Draco of how much he didn’t know. Snape had simply spat the answers at them and expected them to absorb the answers. It wasn’t the most effective way of teaching, probably, but at least Draco didn’t regularly feel like an idiot, like he did with Albus.

He hadn’t been joking when he said he knew nothing of Mind Healing. Draco had always assumed he’d be going into Spell Damage.

“The Cruciatus Curse was invented during the early Middle Ages by dark witches and wizard. It has been known to be credited to Merwyn the Malicious. This has never been proven,” Draco rattled off, effectively. “It wasn’t ruled an Unforgivable until 1717, with the other two: the Killing Curse and the Imperius Curse.”

“Very good. What does it do?” Albus continued on.

"It's a concentrated attack on the pain receptors. It has been described as ‘one-thousand white-hot knives'. It inflames the pain receptors in the meninges and periosteum and the spinal cord. When it's received by the thalamus and cerebral cortex, the body is overwhelmed, and will typically shut down. However, this is only the message of pain being processed through the body. The magic attacks the brain itself, leaving magical burns, much like electricity leaves electrical burns," Draco listed. Albus looked impressed by how much he knew and Draco preened, straightening up just a little more confidently.

And then, Albus frowned again.

"No two Cruciatus Curses are the same," Albus said quietly. Draco frowned at him--this was news to him. "It is the type of spell, in which the Dark wizard will leave their...signature, of sorts. It can be altered by way of altering the movements of casting. If one changes the base movement, the results vary. This variation...caused no screaming. She was frozen. Stiff as a board."

“Another way to torture her. It targeted her pain receptors, but there was no way for her to express the pain,” Draco said, his lips curling a sneer of disgust. He wilted, shaking his head and looking down at Alice. “How do we attack this?”

“How do you think?” Albus returned.

“I think we need to work at the same time. But, I can’t hold her in a trance and work on the Madness Curse,” Draco repeated, disgruntled by the fact.

Albus nodded. “You won’t. Instead...you will be working on the Cruciatus Curse.”

“How? It is not...it heals on its own and it leaves scars,” Draco said firmly.

"Not all the time," Albus said vaguely. And then he waved his wand as if Summoning something.

Draco gasped when fire exploded above them. He jumped so hard that Alice Longbottom jerked on the table, her back arching. Quickly, Draco got a hold of himself, slowly his heart rate. As he calmed, so did Alice Longbottom until she was as still as she was before. Draco gaped as the bright bird soared through the magical theatre before settling at Draco’s side, right on the edge of the floating slab.

It was as large as a swan with a shock of bright crimson feathers. Its tail was golden and as long as one of Draco’s father’s peacocks’ tails. His claws were gleaming like fresh gold and his beak was long and golden as well, glinting like a misshaped Galleon. His small black eyes looked glossy, and he turned his head to *look* at Draco as if staring straight through him.

“A...a *phoenix*,” Draco breathed, wondrously. He looked over at Albus. “How do you have a phoenix?”

“I do not *have* him. Fawkes has *me*,” Albus returned with a gentle smile. “This is how you will help Alice Longbottom. You may not be able to root out the Madness Curse, but you can find the Cruciatus burns.”

“What is he going to do?” Draco whispered in awe. “Is this...he heals, doesn’t he?”

Albus’ eyes were twinkling again, and it was then that Draco knew that Alice Longbottom would live.

“He does. Find the Cruciatus burns, Draco, and tell him to sing.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry looked from the glass down to his notes, furiously attempting to keep track of Alice Longbottom's progress and his own work. The gorgeous phoenix was curled around Malfoy, its tail thrown over Alice Longbottom's body. It wasn't trilling just yet, but Malfoy was finally moving again, his wand moving in strangely smooth circles over Alice's head, as if he were searching for something.

Harry reached across Hannah's lap and squeezed Neville's wrist from where he was pressed between Astoria and Hannah. Hannah looked at him with a helpless smile and Harry nodded back at her. Astoria's grip on Neville's hand was hard and unrelenting, very much as she was, but that seemed to keep Neville grounded.

"Draco is very good. And Dumbledore is there. She will be fine," Astoria whispered in Neville's ear. The gallery was so quiet that her voice traveled as if she'd said it at a normal volume.

"Then, why do they have a *phoenix*?" Neville demanded.

Harry hummed. "Phoenixes, for all their physical healing properties, have a song that is incredibly soothing the mind and quite restorative. It's probably even *better* that they have a phoenix," Harry recited, remembering at least that much from his Care for Magical Creatures class.

"He's right, you know."

The quartet looked up to see Hermione hovering in the doorway again, looking more refreshed than last time.

"I always am," Harry said, running a hand over his wane face. He redirected his gaze back to his notes. McGonagall's handwriting was beginning to blur from exhaustion. He blinked a few times, slapping his cheeks.

"Are you alright?" Hannah asked, brow furrowed. "You can take a nap. We've got him. Well, I've got him. Astoria has to go do our rounds soon."

Harry shook his head. "No, I have work to do anyway. Research."

"You've been here forever," Hermione admonished gently. "Riddle isn't letting you go home?"

"This is actually for McGonagall," Harry said through a yawn. He straightened his spine. If he even relaxed a little bit, he just might topple over into a deep sleep.

"And how is your progress, Potter?"

Harry jumped out of his seat, nearly dropping all of his parchments. McGonagall looked at him, sternly from the doorway. She walked in, glancing down at the magical theatre for just a moment before turning away.

“Going well, Healer!” Harry barked out. “I think I have a few ideas. Nothing solid yet. Almost solid. Nearly solid.”

He was babbling. He was so damned tired, he was babbling.

“Good,” McGonagall said. She stared at Harry a little harder, her shrewd eyes glancing over him. “Potter, don’t you think you should sleep?”

“No,” Harry said almost immediately, just barely keeping the bite out of his voice. “The faster I assist you, the faster you assist Cedric.”

"I will, of course, assist you, Potter. No matter the outcome of my patient," McGonagall said gently. Harry tucked his quill behind his ear as he shuffled through the pages and held out one in particular. McGonagall took it, going over the notes. "Oh?"

“Yeah. It’s what...well Mad-Eye Moody got one, right? After his physical therapy. This person could too. Just a thought. I’m not sure how to...remove the eyes yet. Or stop the curse from spreading. That’s next,” Harry said. He hesitated. “And I know you’d help. It’s just...the faster. Cedric is deteriorating.”

McGonagall nodded. “Very well. Report to me as soon as you find something. I’ve other patients to look in on and Riddle’s notes to review.”

Harry hummed and walked her out. He watched her disappear down the hall and he slumped against the wall, groaning to himself. When he felt hands brush against his cheeks, he didn’t even need to guess to know who it was. When he opened his eyes, he saw Hermione. Hermione smiled at the green-eyed boy. It was a terribly sad smile, but she couldn’t help it.

“What’s going on with you? You don’t talk to me anymore,” Hermione admonished quietly.

And Harry looked so *angry*. He trembled with it, a mean look in his bright green eyes. His eyes were too bright as if he were about to cry and he looked *exhausted*. He crossed his arms over his chest, immediately defensive.

“I’m a little too busy today to just stand around and chat, Hermione,” he said bitingly.

Hermione swallowed her own meanness—the dark meat that rested in her ribs, besides her heart. She took a deep breath instead, centering herself.

“I imagine. We’re Healers. We’re always busy,” Hermione allowed. She was relieved when Harry seemed to relax just a bit, looking at her as if she were no longer a predator ready to bite into his soft bits. Hermione felt a shiver of fear. *When had she become his enemy? Why was he looking at her as if she were going to take the sweetest bits of him and throw it away?*“Are you okay?”

Harry’s mask slipped and his shoulders sagged.

“No,” he whispered. “I’m so tired.”

“Yeah,” Hermione said quietly. “You’ve been secretive. Is it Blaise?”

“It’s the world. It’s so loud,” he snarled again, hackles up again. “God, Hermione, why are you asking so many fucking questions?”

Hermione grit her teeth. There was only so much of Harry’s back and forth that she would put up with.

“Because I care about—”

“You don’t even know me,” Harry scoffed.

Hermione let a mean laugh slip. “I know you, Harry Potter. Stop it,” she snapped.

“If you knew me, you’d know that I *fucked* Tom at the fundraiser and almost fucked him again before I came home to Blaise and fucked *him*,” Harry said with a terrible smile. “You don’t know me.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed.

"You're not as unpredictable as you think you are, Harry. I knew that," Hermione said quietly. Harry's eyes widened and he took a step back. He had been relying on her being shocked to allow him to escape her gaze. Hermione didn't budge. She took a step forward and grabbed his hand. "I know you."

Harry’s expression crumpled.

“I’m so tired, Hermione. Like not even of my personal bullshit. I’m just...so, so *tired*. I’ve been having the *worst* sex of my life. All my patients are dead or dying. I haven’t slept in over forty-eight hours. I’ve been here for two *days*. I was supposed to be done twelve hours ago,” Harry said, letting out a terrible sound. He pressed the heel of his palms into his eyes in order to wake himself up. “I...I can’t go to sleep. I can’t go to sleep. I could save two people. I need to...I need to save them. For me. For him. He needs this, you know. I don’t know why, but Cedric Diggory is *important*. It’s important, Hermione.”

He let his hands drop and he stared at her with a raw expression on his face.

And Hermione was quiet for a long moment in the face of his words. Then, with a compassion that Harry hadn't known Hermione possessed, she pulled him forward, burying her face in his shoulder. His arms hung uselessly at his side as she squeezed him tight as if she were attempting to hold him together.

“You are a gifted Healer with an extraordinary mind. Don’t let what he wants eclipse what you need,” Hermione said quietly. “He’s very handsome, but he is *not* the sun. You are.”

DIAGNOSIS

“You did well, Potter,” Tom said, looking back at Harry. Harry laid across his couch, his head pressed against the arm of the sofa, eyes trained on the board that all of his notes were pinned to.

“Did I really?” he slurred sarcastically.

Tom’s eyes softened. “You did,” he confirmed. “Minerva had a chance to look at my notes. She provided helpful insight.”

“That’s good.” Harry yawned. Even with red eyes and messy hair and a sloppy uniform, Tom still thought that he was beautiful.

Merlin, how *sickening*.

“How did you solve McGonagall’s problem?” Tom asked curiously.

"It was slow acting," Harry rasped, shifting on the couch and burrowing even deeper into the overstuffed cushions. "The Curse. It was an Eye-Burning Curse. Targets moisture. So, I froze it."

“You froze it? Tom asked, wide-eyed.

“The optical nerve. Froze it. The eyes were ruined anyway. Didn’t need the nerve,” Harry said and then he yawned again, bigger than before. Tom turned away so that he didn’t yawn too, but even still, he had to swallow to stop himself. He hated that strangely human tic. Yawning in sympathy for someone else.

“What will you do with the eyes?” Tom asked though he had a hunch already. Harry mumbled something that Tom couldn’t quite understand. The young man’s eyes looked glossy, which only made them an even prettier green. “Prosthetics?”

“Mmmm,” Harry confirmed with a hum.

Tom nodded and turned away. "Pay attention, Harry," Tom said though he expected no such thing. He looked over the notes and then at the primary information that was scrawled at the very center of the board. It had taken some time to retrieve the answer—Nott had taken his sweet time.

But, within the week, they had retrieved the incantation of the original curse from the depths of the Department of Mysteries: *Kardiafors Khawardan.*

It was a bastard spell—a masterful mix of the most powerful of magic, Persian; the most transfiguration magic, Latin; and the holiest, most sacred magic of Healing, Greek.

Tom wasn’t sure if he admired or despised the being that had created the spell that had haunted him for so long.

It would be tricky since the spell had long since evolved into the virus that it currently was, but ultimately, the virus could be considered damage from a spell cast long ago.

And though the spell had no countercurse, it did give him information.

Primarily that while it was a curse—there was no doubt of that with the blatant use of Persian—it was also a terribly good piece of Transfigurative magic. Tom was irritated, but he was confident enough to acknowledge that he hadn't noticed until McGonagall had pointed out the suffix of the first part of the incantation: *-fors*.

"Transfiguration," Tom murmured to himself. "Harry, what are five branches of Transfiguration?"

Harry mumbled in response.

"Transformation, Untransformation, Vanishment, and Conjuration," Tom answered for him. He paced as he examined the board. "The first conclusion would be 'Untransformation'. But, it's impossible. You were correct in stating that the organ is effectively dead. It's ruined. Bodies that die while in the throes of Polyjuice remain as they died. They can be *untransformed*.

Tom paused. Harry snuffled into the couch.

"But, they can continue to be *transformed*," Tom breathed. He was staring at the notes, looking from the potions notes that they had taken to the incantation once more. "Oh. *Oh.*But, it's Greek, you see. It's a Healing Transfiguration curse. Four branches of magic—Transformation, Dark Arts, Healing, and Potions. Brilliant. Oh, it's Christmas."

Harry grunted, and Tom thought he might've rolled over behind him. Tom paid him no mind.

"Human Transfiguration. *Healing* Transfiguration," Tom said, confirming his earlier half-formed theories now that he truly understood the makeup of the curse. "How do you Heal and Transfigure? Potions. Which potions transform...*Polyjuice Potions.* Harry, we are *brilliant*. Absolutely brilliant. *I'm* brilliant! Using the theory of Polyjuice Potion—all of the transformative qualities—and then transforming the heart...oh, I'm *fucking* brilliant!"

Tom spun around, waiting for Harry to applaud so that he could bask in the utterly delightful feeling of being right.

His fierce expression of triumph tempered when he saw that Harry was long gone from the world the awake. Harry snored softly from the couch, one arm tossed over his eyes. He was practically curled up into a little ball, having pressed as closely as he could to the back of the couch. Tom frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. Slowly, he counted back the hours that Harry had been at the hospital. Nearly 50 hours.

"Oh, you silly boy," Tom breathed. "You should've said something."

He frowned down at Harry. He looked so very vulnerable when he was asleep. It wasn't often that Harry allowed that vulnerability around Tom. Not anymore, at least. Maybe Tom deserved that. Maybe. Probably.

Tom hummed, waving his wand and Conjured a thick fleece blanket. Carefully, he spread it over Harry, unwilling to disturb his sleep. He would fetch one of the young man's housemates to get him in a few hours. He took a few more minutes just watching Harry sleep.

"You can't save everybody," Tom said quietly, reaching forward to brush Harry's hair back from his face. "Not everyone can be. Not everyone wants to be. You shouldn't kill yourself trying."

Tom had learned that long ago.

He pulled back, straightening his robes. He had a plan to present to his patient—the patient he would make sure *lived*.

And perhaps, that made him a hypocrite, but Tom had never had a problem with being one.

He just didn't make the same mistakes twice.

Tom strode from his office, preparing his speech to the Diggorys in his head. He came to a stop as soon as he shut his office door.

She was leaning against the opposite wall.

Hermione Granger was an intimidating woman to her peers. Tom could see that. But, he was not one of her peers. He was not intimidated by her.

"He's going to be great," Granger said conversationally. "Why won't you let him be great?"

It was *always* about Harry.

Tom sighed. "You've exhausted me already, Granger."

If Granger was offended, she didn't show it. Her eyes were unusually shrewd, devoid of the usual rage that simmered through her bloodstream.

"He hasn't slept in a real bed in over forty-some hours. I just...he is going to be great," Granger repeated, her voice slow and purposeful, as if speaking to a child. "You can't horde him from the world when you won't even admit that you care for him, let alone love him."

"Granger, did I invite you to talk about my personal life?" Tom asked, his voice hard. He glared at Granger, sure that he could use her strange urge to please all authority figures against her. But, even as she winced, she pressed on, standing taller.

"Harry is my person. He is…" Granger trailed off, her hands shaking just so. "Before Harry, I didn't have a person. I didn't have anyone. But, now, I have him. I take care of him and I protect him...even from the things that he loves because he would self-destruct to take care of the people he loves. He would do anything to do what he loves, to save a life. And I'm not going to let you destroy him. You...you need to get your priorities in order, Healer Riddle. Love him or don't. But, don't lead him on like that. He's not...don't treat this like it's a game."

Tom stared at Granger for a long time through narrowed eyes. After the words spilled from her mouth like vomit, she nearly cringed, only gritting her teeth and staring at him to steel herself. Her hands were clenched into tight fists and there was a fierce look in her eyes as she defended 'her person'. Tom pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"Harry has never been a game," Tom finally said.

Granger lifted her chin and nodded once. "Good. Because he is extraordinary and you don't deserve him."

She turned on her heel, ready to stomp away with the final word. Tom would let her have this one. He let out a long sigh and looked down the long hallway, watching her walk right past Rodolphus. The man's eyebrows were so high on his forehead they were nearly in his hairline. Rodolphus blinked, slowly approaching Tom.

"Bloody women," Tom huffed under his breath. "That's the third bloody woman that has threatened me on Harry Potter's behalf."

"Third?" Rodolphus asked.

"Evans, McGonagall, and now Granger. Do they all think he needs to be fucking defended?" Tom asked sharply.

Rodolphus shrugged. "Maybe they don't want him to become as sharp and bitter and jaded as you are. Maybe they don't want him to be as *afraid* as you are."

Tom gave Rodolphus a look that a lesser man would quiver at. Rodolphus just stared back at him, far too used to that look to really react. Tom let out a long huff, and crossed his arms.

"I have to go speak with my patient about a plan?" Tom said, almost uncertain.

Rodolphus raised an eyebrow. "A plan? You have a cure for the Hearteater Virus? Really?"

"Perhaps. It's a plan. A brilliant plan. But, it's only a cure if the plan works," Tom said grudgingly. He always hated not being sure about something. It's why Harry always threw him so off-balance. Harry was so unpredictable that he *always* made Tom unsure of what to do and what to say. He started to lead them down the hall, towards Diggory's room.

"After, do you want to drink?" Rodolphus asked.

Tom paused and looked at the man from the corner of his eye. Rodolphus looked so nonchalant, but Tom could see the tension in his shoulders.

"Drink what?"

"Firewhiskey. Gin. Vodka. Whatever. Only hard liquor," Rodolphus sighed. "I need a drink."

"What for?"

"Bloody women," Rodolphus said with a smirk.

Ah. So, Bellatrix.

“You’re both stupid,” Tom said shortly.

“Who’s stupid?”

Speak of the dragon and it shall appear, breathing flames.

“Bella,” Rodolphus drawled. He reached forward to tuck a loose strand of hair back into her bun, but she swatted at his hand as if it were annoying Cornish pixie. It only made Rodolphus’ smile softer.

Tom resisted the urge to gag.

“We’re drinking,” Tom decided. “After I talk to the patient.”

Bellatrix’s eyes widened and she leaned forward. “Where are we drinking? Oh, are we going to Knockturn Alley?” Bellatrix asked. She began to rattle off a list of bars that the trio had been known to occupy in their youth. Tom and Rodolphus exchanged a glance, and slowly, Bellatrix tapered off. “Oh. *Oh.*”

“What?” Tom barked.

Bellatrix swallowed and took a step back. She brushed her hair back and he could see a bit of dry blood that she had missed on her jaw.

“*You* two are drinking,” she said. She glanced at Rodolphus. “So...no dinner tonight, then. That’s fine.”

“Bella—” Rodolphus said.

Tom frowned. He had no idea that they had a standing dinner date. So, Tom wasn’t the only emotionally constipated adult around. Good to know.

“What? I’m going to owl Cissy. How much do you think it’d cost to get an International Portkey to the continent? Or maybe I’ll do one of those ferry boats. The Muggle ones? Across the Thames. It shouldn’t be hard,” Bellatrix rattled, sounding more unhinged the longer she spoke. She took a step back and gave a painfully strange smile, so unlike the ones that she used to have and so similar to that smile that she had given him the first time they had met.

They had been eleven. She had been terrified.

And alone.

“We’re drinking,” Tom repeated quietly. Bellatrix frowned at him. “Go get a bottle of gin, Bella. You remember where the flat is. I’ll see you both in twenty minutes.”

He slipped into Diggory’s room without another word.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, there are only five chapters and an epilogue left.

That's kinda insane. That's sooo insane, actually. I'm getting so close to the climax, and I'm both so happy and sad. I'm happy because, I'm super proud of myself for actually getting this far. But, I'm sad, because I don't want this to end. But, alas, all good things must come to an end. But, not just yet. I have to readjust some of my outlines, though, because there are a few scenes that I'm eager to stuff in there, somehow. So, get excited, because I believe the next few chapters are on the LONG side so I can finish telling the story I want to tell.

Also, don't get excited by the Pansy appearance. She's pretty irrelevant in this story, and most likely won't be popping up again in any important role.

ANYWAY, CITATIONS TIME:

Eye-Burning Curse (depicted): credited to spell-checkers

Eye-Pecking Curse (mentioned): credited to themonsterblogofmonsters

Heart-Eater Virus (depicted): credited to themonsterblogofmonsters
The spell incantation, however, is my own. I just thought it would be fun to try it out. It was.

Cor Cordis (not mentioned by name): credited to themonsterblogofmonsters

Cruciatus Curse: credited to calle-bricriu: http://calleo-bricriu.tumblr.com/post/174762556748/you-like-to-go-on-and-on-and-on-about-things-tell

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two bulbs exploded in the chaos, tiny shards of glass sprinkling to the floor, but leaving anyone unharmed. As if anyone would notice anyway. They were all slathering beasts, clambering for the two women posing on the short raised dais, ready to put any of their words down in ink, as if they were *the* words. Dumbledore stood to the side, beaming at the pair of Healers as they posed together, holding the copy of the Annual Review of Magical Medicine open between them, the title of their paper emblazoned on the page in emerald green ink.

ON THE EFFECTS OF UNICORN HAIR: Unicorn hair and its Healing effects on Dark-oriented wounds.

Emmeline Vance and Hermione Granger had done the impossible. Harry knew that.

Hearing them dumb down their brief explanations for the press had only solidified Harry's certainty in that. Watching the press throw themselves into a frenzy to snap photos of and get quotes from the dream team themselves meant others knew it too.

"Published in the *Annual Review.* Have you even read the paper? How do we know it's good?" Snape grumbled to his left, eyes narrowed on the two young women. "As far as I know they're just two silly young girls."

"Two young Healers that were published in the *Annual Review*," Lily retorted on Harry's right, her eyes narrowed at Snape. "Does it bother you that they're younger than you and have accomplished more or that they have the audacity to be women while doing it?"

Harry winced at the pointed questions and he looked over at Snape, silently. Two rosy circles rose in the man's pallid cheeks and he wilted under Lily's terrifying gaze, choosing to slink off than to justify his words. It was a wise choice for a not-so-wise man.

"Wow. She's published," Harry whispered to himself as he looked over at Hermione. She caught his eye, squinting through flashes and her grin widened.

He grinned back, sticking a thumb up, pride overwhelming in his chest, and yet...there was something in his stomach, clawing at his insides and his cheeks burned.

As soon as Hermione looked away, turning to laugh at something Vance said, Harry's smile dropped.

Lily looked down at her son from the corner of her eye. He was staring past the crowd, arms folded across his chest. She tried to read his expression before acknowledging that she didn't know him quite well enough to do that anymore. That wasn't to say she didn't *know* her son. She knew his ambitions, his fury, that he had the biggest heart in the world. But, she didn't

know his favorite color or his strange quirks. She would learn, in time, if she earned the right, and she was trying.

Oh, she was trying.

“How was your date on Thursday?” Lily asked, drawing Harry’s attention from the press circus happening before them.

“It was...fine,” Harry sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I can’t fucking *stand* Zabini.”

Lily frowned. “Then, why did you go on a date with him?”

“I was going to dump him. It was going to be *glorious*, Mum," Harry said, sounding depressed about the whole affair. "And then, we went to Florence for lunch, and there was amazing wine and good food—better food than I've had in a long time. I can afford takeaway and basic groceries on my salary. But, no, in Florence, I had pasta with *real* Parmesan. It’s been so long.”

“You didn’t dump him, did you? Lily asked, unimpressed.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can only afford Indian takeaway and Firewhiskey that tastes like rubbing alcohol and fire.”

Lily hummed and remained unaffected while on the inside, she was *screaming* with joy. This was her chance!

She would offer Harry her very best advice to ensure his happiness, and it would bring them *closer*. He would look at her and think: *Wow, I remember that time that Mum offered me bang-up advice, I’m so much happier now*. All she wanted was for Harry to be happy and, maybe, possibly, to hang out with her more. Or at least not be embarrassed to be seen in public with her.

Except, according to her Mind Healer, it was normal for young adults to be embarrassed to be seen out in public with their parents, so maybe that was okay.

Lily thought briefly of what she wanted to say.

“Don’t date a man because he gets you nice things.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, okay, Mum. Great advice for someone who’s dated *one* person,” Harry retorted.

“I dated someone before your father. Severus,” Lily said. Across the room, Severus stiffened and lifted his head, looking around like a bloodhound. Lily sighed and looked over at her son instead. He looked appalled at the very idea. “It wasn’t my brightest idea. I thought that since we had been friends since we were children that we should be together. At least, that’s what he said, and I thought: why not?”

“Oh my God, that’s horrifying,” Harry breathed.

Lily shrugged. “It was quite the same from when we were friends. He was too frightened to even try to kiss me.”

“No! We’re not talking about *Snape* kissing you,” Harry hissed vehemently, shaking his head like a wet dog. “*God*, Mum.”

Lily pressed onward. “It got to the point where I thought that it was strange that we were ‘dating’ anyway. There weren’t any romantic or sexual feelings. In an attempt to secure our relationship, Severus used his measly funds—made from selling Hangover Potions, mind you—to purchase me the nicest potions set.”

Harry frowned, suspicious of the story. “And then?”

“I proceeded to end our relationship amicably. I kept the potions set, though.”

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes at his mother. Lily allowed herself a half-smile and shrugged one shoulder.

“I don’t know the lesson in that story,” Harry said.

“Don’t stay with a man because he can offer you nice things,” Lily reiterated. “I decided that Severus and I operated better in a platonic friendship so we resumed that relationship rather than the farce of romantic transactions that he thought we should engage in.”

Harry frowned as he parsed through his mother’s convoluted, overly complicated words.

“I think you’d be better as nothing,” he decided. “Snape is an arse, and he’s definitely still bitter.”

As if to punctuate his words, he glanced over at Snape from the corner of his eyes. He was watching Lily wistfully, but when he gaze connected with Harry's, he scowled and turned back to face the front again. Harry followed the man's attention to the two women posing on the dais, grinning in the face of camera flashes, and he felt that strange sinking feeling again.

“Nevermind about Severus and his vast amount of feelings,” Lily said, tossing her dark red hair behind her shoulder. “What about *you* and *your* vast amount of feelings? For a certain...someone.”

She looked at Harry meaningfully and then slowly turned to stare at Tom. Harry had tried to pretend that he hadn’t noticed Tom the minute that he’d walked into the room, but had failed miserably. Tom looked particularly handsome that morning, his hair not perfectly done, some of it falling into his eyes as he slumped against the wall, tucked between Bellatrix and Rodolphus of all people. He looked bored.

“There are no feelings.”

“There are so many feelings,” Lily corrected. Her eyes narrowed as she looked at her son’s sheepish expression. “Have you slept with him again?”

“*Mum*,” Harry hissed, eyes wide and nostrils flaring. “This isn’t...we’re not...this conversation is *not* happening.”

“My Mind Healer said—”

“Nope. Lavender is getting letters from someone, isn’t she? I know who it is,” Harry said pointedly.

Lily paused, considering the two pieces of gossip. She shook her head. “Harry, we’re supposed to be strengthening our relationship. I could give you tips about—”

Harry groaned and scurried away, cheeks turning red. Lily frowned after him.

Why was he so worked up?

She was only going to tell him expert tips on dumping men that didn’t deserve to be in his presence.

DIAGNOSIS

“What are we doing tonight?” Rodolphus drawled as the trio walked from the press conference. “Dinner in Knockturn?”

“Aren’t we too respectable for that?” Bellatrix asked, frowning at the pair. “We’re adults now. Healers. Respected pillars of the community. We can’t just go to *Knockturn*.”

Tom scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Who cares about respectability?” he muttered. He stared at the pair, narrow-eyed and suspicious. “Also ‘we’?”

“Really, Tom? We used to spend every night together,” Rodolphus said pointedly.

“Yes. When we were kids. We’re adults now. Aren’t we supposed to have respectful boundaries?” he challenged.

Rodolphus and Bellatrix stared at him owlishly.

“But, I want to bring Nagini a rat. I missed her,” Bellatrix pouted.

“She hates you.”

"Yes, but if I had a rat, maybe she'd like me," Bellatrix pointed out as if a dead rat would be the answer to all of her problems and end the decades-long feud that she'd had with Nagini since the trio was eleven years old.

“She won’t ever like you,” Tom said bluntly. He ignored Bellatrix’s pouting, edging past one of the eager press agents that were talking amongst themselves, probably debating the angle

of their pieces. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I need to check on my patient.”

“How’s he doing?” Rodolphus asked.

“He’s improving. Marginally. It hasn’t been long enough yet. He’s only been treated for a week,” Tom muttered under his breath. He glanced over at Rodolphus and then at Bellatrix, shifting with a strange expression on his face. “Does this not feel...abnormal to you?”

“What?” Bellatrix asked.

“Us. Being...friends,” Tom said, his nose wrinkling in disgust at the very concept.

“We were friends for over two decades. Twenty years,” Bellatrix said, sagely. “What kind of friendship doesn’t have a few...blemishes?”

“You fucked our best friend on top of my desk. Excuse me for still being startled by the sudden resuming of our friendly relationship,” Tom said scathingly. He looked between the two again, searching for whether they were affected by his words, but they seemed to have let it roll off their back.

“We weren’t happy. Successful and beautiful, but unhappy,” Bellatrix decided. “I think we deserve happiness, don’t you?”

“Well, ye—”

“Good. Then, let’s talk about how to make *you* happy, Tom,” Bellatrix said cheerfully. She grabbed his elbow and carefully turned him away from the lifts and towards the stairs. Rodolphus groaned at the concept but was silenced by a fearsome glower. “How’s Harry fucking Potter?”

“Why do you say that like it’s his name?” Rodolphus asked curiously.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "It's how I think of him in my head. Because the world thinks that sunshine and glory comes out of his ass," Bellatrix said moodily. She visibly shook herself and seemed to inject steel in her spine. Even then, Tom could see how tense and uncomfortable she was on the subject. She pushed onward. "How's working with him?"

“He’s a good assistant,” Tom said, short and sharp.

“And that’s all?” Bellatrix pushed on.

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “You really want to talk about this? In the open?”

“We’re in an empty staircase,” Bellatrix said, not quite answering the question.

Rodolphus looked between the two, amused. “Bella…” he warned.

“Why aren’t you and Potter together, Tom?” Bellatrix barked.

Tom's eyes narrowed. "The question implies that you want us to be when you *specifically* said that you would have your father deny me the Gorsemoor Grant if I even considered—"

"Shut up," Bellatrix snapped. Her nostrils flared, and Tom looked appalled and shocked that she had dared to speak to him that way. "Don't...it's about what *you* want. What *I* want doesn't matter. I know what I said."

"Then, why are you asking?" Tom snapped.

"Why are you acting like you've *ever* listened to me before?" Bellatrix retorted. Her hands clenched into tight fists. "Look I know I did something wrong. I did a terribly bad thing. But don't act like you didn't either."

"What did *I* do?" Tom hissed, turning on her. "You cheated—"

"You weren't there! You didn't even notice, Tom! It was all about you and your work and your accomplishments all the *time*. You were a shitty fiance and you were a shitty friend. If we even *were* your friends. Sometimes, it felt like you just needed...needed an *audience* to applaud when you got something right *again*," Bellatrix snarled.

Tom's eyes widened as she ranted at him. This wasn't something she'd ever done before. Bellatrix pouted and whined and complained. But, she had never truly gotten angry with him until after he'd caught her. Now, it seemed that she no longer felt the need to placate him or to stroke his feathers.

Tom thought he might like new Bellatrix far more than old Bellatrix.

"Okay," Tom said blankly.

Bellatrix let out a fuming sigh. Rodolphus looked a little more in love.

Tom had to hide a smirk behind a blank expression.

"As I was *saying*," Bellatrix said, "you've never listened to a single thing I've said before. You've never done as you're told. It's a primary character trait. If you wanted to be with Potter, you would be. And I think you do want to be with him and he wants to be with you, and *you* won't let it happen."

"Oh, really? Do you agree with this sentiment, Rodolphus?" Tom asked.

Rodolphus' lips pulled into a small, knowing smirk. "Leave me out of this. I'm being entertained. Do continue, Bella."

"You're afraid, Tom," Bellatrix announced. "You're afraid because you've never been in love before."

"And how would you know?" Tom snarled.

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed. "I was in love with you, Tom Riddle," she said, her voice so soft. "And I know that the way you look at him? It was never the way you looked at me."

Tom was silent.

Bellatrix continued, “You love him. And you’re afraid. Now, it’s out there. The question is what are we going to do about it?”

“We?” Rodolphus squawked.

Bellatrix smirked. “Yeah, ‘we’.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Harry...I can’t believe this happening,” Hermione squealed as she backed down the hallway. “I just can’t—”

“Congratulations, Granger!”

“Congrats, Healer!”

Hermione beamed. “Thank you!” she said, waving at her *adoring* public.

Harry kept his smile pasted on his face, even as it felt increasingly wooden. Hermione was practically glowing. She looked lovely in her Healer robes—as lovely as one could in hunter green trainee robes. Her hair was immaculate, her having spent over an hour carefully taking gel and a hard bristle brush to her scalp, scraping it back into a large curly puff of a ponytail atop her head. She had even done a little bit of makeup. Ron had taken one look at her and looked as if he had been hit over the head with a Bludger. Harry had wondered if they had said those words to each other. From the way they looked at each other, it wouldn't be too far off if they hadn't.

It made his insides roar.

“Yeah. You did...you did amazing, Hermione,” Harry said quietly.

And he knew that. She was amazing. Hermione was brilliant. Hermione saved his little sister. Hermione was smart and good and just...the best. She had, well, everything. And Harry should be happy, and he was, really, but he also...wasn’t. Because, Hermione, well, she had *everything.*

Hermione had a loving boyfriend.

Harry had an emotionally constipated jackass of an ex, who he was still madly in love with.

Hermione had a booming career, the youngest Healer to be published in the Annual Review. Ever.

For the past five months, almost every single one of Harry's patients had died a miserable death.

Hermione Granger had her *shit* together.

And Harry was a fucking mess.

She was still prattling on. "It's just...I can't believe it. Emmeline and I have been getting interview requests from *everyone*. They want us on the cover of Witch Weekly. To show young witches that they too can be Healers. And it's just a rumor, but Emmeline told me that we're on the shortlist for the Women of the Year award. It's just...*God,* Harry. I used to wonder if this...if I would have to give up certain things to achieve what I wanted to. But, I feel like I've gotten everything I've ever worked for. *Everything*. Ron, the paper, Vance...with this kind of exposure, we might even get a grant to continue working with Vance's Spectre friend, Bath. And Ron...Harry, I think I *love* him, and I think...I think I might tell—"

"Yup. That is...awesome," Harry whispered, staring blankly down the hallway. Hermione came to a stop, her eyes narrowing on his expression. Harry slowed down as well, staring at her.

"What?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "What are you making that face for?"

Harry swallowed, shaking his head. "Nothing, Hermione."

"Hey. No. What's wrong?" Hermione asked, taking a step closer. When Harry flinched back violently, a hurt expression crossed her face, before her eyes shuttered, and slowly she crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for him to speak.

"Shut up," Harry whispered. He kept his eyes trained on the ground.

Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Excuse me?"

"You know, just...just shut up about all of it. Shut up about your relationship with Ron and Vance and the fucking *Spectre* and the *damned* paper. I don't wanna...everyone is dying, and I...Hermione, I don't want to hear this," Harry rasped.

Hermione's eyes widened and her jaw unhinged. Slowly, she took a step back. "What are you...saying?"

"This happily ever after does not exist. You *cannot* have it all. There is only the work, Hermione, and I can't *listen* to you anymore...talking like...there is *only* the work," Harry said, harshly.

Hermione slowly shook her head.

"You don't believe that," she said, quietly. But, he could hear the rage brewing just under the surface, and it only made him want to lash out more. "I know you don't. Not after what your mother put you—"

“My mother was right,” Harry said coldly. “You want to be great? Then, don’t let yourself be distracted with other shit.”

“If Ron heard you right now,” Hermione hissed, and she shook her head, unable to finish her sentence. She took a deep shuddering breath to center herself. She leaned in, eyes narrowed. “You’re *jealous* of me. Because I’m *succeeding*. You should be happy for me.”

And as always, she found the heart of it all. But, this time, Harry wouldn’t back down.

“You won’t work,” Harry said cruelly. “You’ll get distracted by him, and it’ll be no fault of yours because you can’t help your ambition. After all, you tried to trade him for a step up, didn’t you? He didn’t mean all that much to you then, did he? Not when he couldn’t give you what you wanted. But, you can’t help yourself. Don’t make yourself choose between the chance of being great and *him*. It’s *beneath* you.”

“Don’t say such things just because Riddle chose the work over *you*. Ron loves *me.*”

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat. Hermione’s eyes widened and for a moment, they just stared at one another, because both of them understood the implication of her words.

He didn’t choose you. He doesn’t love *you*.

“Okay,” Harry whispered, his voice cracking. Hermione took a step forward, but Harry shook his head, a terrible smile on his face. “You’re right. You’re always right, Hermione.”

“Harry, why did you…” Hermione whispered, her voice cracking. “Why did you have to *ruin* everything?”

He could see the tears welling in her eyes.

Harry was shaking. “I’m...I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

“I don’t want to talk to you very much either right now. You can be a right arse, Harry Potter,” Hermione said, her voice hard. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand, and when her hand dropped to the side again, all semblance of tears were gone. She was just *angry* now. “If you’ll excuse me, I have patients to save.”

Another crack, even if she hadn’t meant to.

Harry turned away without another word, stalking into the cafeteria. He didn’t bother with a full lunch, only a measly sandwich and a goblet of water. Carefully, Harry looked around the cafeteria, searching for people he knew.

In the end, he ate alone.

DIAGNOSIS

The four trainees stood outside the room, shifting nervously as they awaited their case. Both Dumbledore and Luna looked anxious. It was foreboding to witness, especially when the pair were perhaps the two most serene Healers in all of St. Mungo's. Draco looked at the other trainees, and he nudged Astoria's hand with his own. She looked up at him, flashing a tight smile before she looked back and forth down the hallway again.

"Hannah, Neville, will you go see what's taking them so—" Luna began. She shook her head. "Nevermind."

Even as she spoke, the two mediwizards proceeded down the hallway. They weren't rushing, not anymore. Likely, they had gotten everything under control at the scene. Weasley looked strange in black—gaunt and haunting, unlike what he looked like at any other time. Draco thought that the vision of the plague doctor mask hanging from around his neck added to the atmosphere. Rodolphus looked rather relaxed for someone that had just rushed all the way to Hogwarts to stabilize and take in a girl.

"How was her transfer?" Dumbledore asked.

"It went well," Rodolphus said cheerfully. Swiftly, he passed Luna the girl's file, and Luna began to rifle through it, a serious expression on her face that looked quite absurd

Weasley scowled. "We had to subdue her."

"But, she's here," Rodolphus reminded Weasley. He looked over at Dumbledore and gave a strange little bow. "We give her to you."

"What is wrong with her?" Astoria asked, bluntly.

Draco took a step forward, observing the patient that had been brought to the Children's Ward. She was a slight pretty girl with a mass of curls—though they weren't quite like Granger's tight curls—and smooth skin. But, there was something about her that was...strangely warped. And terrifying.

"Well...it's a bit complicated," Weasley began. "We should move her inside."

Malfoy watched as the two mediwizards levitated the cot into the room and carefully transferred the girl to the bed, careful not to startle the blanket that covered her body. Longbottom, Abbott, Astoria, and Draco filed in after Luna and Dumbledore, and suddenly, Draco felt as if the room was far too crowded for just one girl.

Except, there was something…wrong.

"Present the case, Weasley," Rodolphus said, and he was suddenly grim again.

Weasley frowned. "Romilda Vane, 16. We were originally called to Hogwarts because it was a particularly tricky case of Spell Damage. See here," Weasley said, and briefly, he lifted the blanket covering most of her body, exposing her feet and ankles. Draco started when he saw the wings fluttering there on her ankles.

“Okay,” Luna whispered, going around, and examining the wings. “But, they’re not? Are they?”

“No,” Rodolphus confirmed. “It wouldn’t respond to the diagnostics.”

“A creature?” Hannah suggested.

Luna hummed, shrugging. “I don’t know magizoology well enough to confirm. Astoria, pen a letter to Rolf Scamander. I’d like to request a consult from him.”

Draco watched as Astoria scrawled down the note, nodding as Luna continued to pace in front of the bed.

“Why are we here?” Draco asked, careful to keep the complaint out of his voice. Dumbledore looked amused anyway, his lips twitching.

“We *thought* it was Spell Damage. Then, when that was disproven, we *thought* she was, perhaps, a creature-hybrid, of some sort. But, then, Madame Pomfrey began to tell us some of her symptoms. And it’s...she’s going through withdrawal, Head Healer,” Weasley said, uncertainly.

Draco’s brow furrowed, and he looked over at Dumbledore. Dumbledore no longer looked amused.

“She’s an addict,” Dumbledore said quietly.

“To what?” Hannah asked with a frown.

Dumbledore pulled forth his wand and slowly pointed it at Romilda Vane’s temple.

“*Finite Incantantem.*”

Draco let out a hoarse sound as slowly the enchantments melted away. The spells and potions came off in layers, melting away, and leaving waxy damaged behind. Slowly, Romilda Vane’s hair lost its luster, big tufts of hair falling out in clumps. The smoothness of her face washed away, revealing devastating craters and scabs across her cheeks, her lips thinning and cracking under the loss of magic. The tone in her arms withered away, leaving sticklike appendages, and the plumpness of her breasts flattened entirely, leaving behind a boyish figure. Her eyes looked sunken in, and finally, she looked very akin to a skeleton with dry, papery skin fitting to every jut of bone.

“Oh my God,” Hannah breathed, her hand clapping to her mouth. She trembled, and slowly turned away, her hand tightening on Neville’s wrist.

“That’s why I was called,” Neville murmured to himself. “She’s addicted to Mod potions.”

“Mod potions?” Draco asked, unable to tear his eyes away from the girl—or what was left of her.

"Physical Modification potions. And spells too, I believe," Dumbledore said severely. He took a step forward, brushing the limp hair away from her face. Romilda Vane was shivering in her bed. He waved his wand again, sending a severe wave of heat and slowly she stilled again, relaxing on the Warming Charm. "And she's had this addiction for a long time."

"What about the wings?" Luna asked. She no longer looked so serene. There was a sharp look in her eyes that told Draco all he needed to know—Luna was committed to saving this girl.

“It could be a side effect of the modification. An ill-effect of the potions,” Neville said.

“Or the Transfiguration. There’s spell usage here,” Hannah provided.

Rodolphus was still staring at the girl. “I think it prudent to get Scamander in here as a consult. You have to rule out her being a creature-hybrid before you treat her. She might be allergic or impervious to certain spells or potions,” Rodolphus said. He took a step back and grabbed Weasley by the sleeve, jerking him back too. Weasley looked horrified. “Anything else, Head Healer?”

“No. Thank you, Rodolphus, Ronald.”

Weasley nodded weakly and he followed Rodolphus from the room. Draco still felt claustrophobic, and he still couldn’t look away from Romilda Vane.

“How do we proceed until Scamander gets here?” Astoria asked.

Luna pursed her lips and she crossed her arms. “Physically, she can be brought back to health. Mentally...that is beyond me. She is a child, but she is an addict. She needs more than just me as a Healer,” Luna decided. She looked over at Dumbledore, and he nodded at her. “Astoria, you will be her case handler.”

Astoria’s widened and she nearly balked, if Astoria was capable of such things.

“Luna, I have never...I am Healer-in-Charge on this case?” Astoria asked.

Luna nodded firmly. “You are.”

Astoria swallowed and straightened. She held her hand out and carefully Luna gave her Romilda Vane’s file. Astoria clutched it tight to her chest.

“*D’accord*,” Astoria murmured. “Neville, please go and research Physical Modification potions. Compile a possible list of potions that she might’ve taken to achieve her previous state.”

“Of course,” Longbottom said with a nod. He didn’t seem to have any issue with taking instruction from a fellow trainee. Draco was and wasn’t surprised—Astoria was one of the most competent people that Draco knew, but even he felt a little jealous of her being in charge.

“Hannah, please formally check in Romilda Vane as a semi-permanent resident of the Children’s Ward. I am sure Hogwarts sent a letter to her family, informing her of her transfer, but it would be best to send a formal letter as well. Leave them my contact information. I will meet with them as soon as possible,” Astoria said.

Abbott did hesitate, but only for a second. Slowly, a wry smile crossed her face and she nodded.

“Yes, Healer,” she murmured before she left the room as well.

“And us?” Draco said quietly.

“She will need Mind Healers,” Astoria said severely. “Addiction is a disease of the mind. The brain.”

Draco nodded and looked back at Dumbledore, but the older man had taken a step back.

“Healer?” Draco asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. Draco slowly looked back to Astoria.

“You, *mon ami,* will be Romilda Vane’s Mind Healer,” Astoria decided.

“But, I’m not—” Draco began, but when he looked around at all of the Healers, they stared back at him, unflinchingly. Draco swallowed once and nodded. “Yes, Healer Greengrass.”

DIAGNOSIS

“I apologize. For what I said earlier.”

Lily looked up from her article, raising a single eyebrow at the sheepish man lingering in the doorway to her office. Severus swayed back and forth, as if unsure if he should enter, and finally decided when Lily crooked a finger at him. She looked down at the Annual Review again, disinterested. Eagerly, he pressed the door shut behind him and walked to the chair in front of her desk. He pressed a hand to his nose, squeezing at the overlong appendage with a handkerchief as he sneezed.

“It is quite dusty in here. Don’t you think you could do with a cleaning? There are elves you could ask,” Severus said pointedly.

Lily hummed. "And I could also do it myself," she retorted, casually turning the page. "The in-depth case study of Lavender is lovely. They don't name her--of course they don't, she's a minor--but the care that they gave in their descriptions of her ordeal and the discussion of the process is very nice."

That was high praise from Lily Evans, and they both knew it.

“They’re both young,” Severus murmured. “Granger is younger than you, already being published in the Annual Review.”

"She may not have taken point, but she was excellent. I watched the procedure, Severus. Emmeline Vance is masterful in her field, and Granger couldn't have a better teacher," Lily said serenely. There was something about the intensity of the two women that she admired. If she were being honest with herself, she might even say that she was slightly jealous. She missed when being published made her feel alive instead of feeling like a chore.

She missed being in a potions lab or in a magical theatre with her hands in a body, saving someone’s life. She envied them.

“You miss it.”

Lily looked up, sharp-eyed. Severus, for all of how annoying he could be, had always been able to read her well.

“Perhaps,” she said, drumming her fingers against the side of her desk.

Severus took her weakness as an opportunity to push his agenda. “Then, why do you not return? Your daughter is well-healed; it is nearly the summer, so there is no need for homeschooling. This would be the perfect opportunity—”

“It wouldn’t,” Lily interrupted quickly, eyes flashing. Severus looked hurt. “Harry…”

“You will let your children stop you from achieving greatness once more?” Severus snapped, pushing past his hurt. “You possess one of the most brilliant minds on Earth, Lily, and you let it rot, playing housewife to your Auror husband and your children. What happened to your drive? You once thought that you might find the panacea! You thought that you could conquer all diseases. And now—”

“Shut up, Severus,” Lily barked, promptly cowing Severus into submission. Her eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. “Don’t speak to me as if I’m a child. And don’t you *dare* make the presumption that the fact that my family is making me stay home. My drive is the reason that I don’t *know* my kids, and I won’t let it be the reason I don’t know them again.”

“I don’t understand you,” Severus scoffed. “You were never suited for children. *You* said it, when you were pregnant with Potter.”

“I wasn’t. And I’m not. But, they’re mine, and I’m an adult, now. Harry is my son. Lavender is my daughter. And I love them far more than the idea of the panacea, and I’ve come to realize that their happiness is my top priority. It’s *important* to me. And Harry doesn't need me here. Not now. Especially, not now."

Severus shook his head, standing to his feet. He crossed to her bookshelf and pull down two handfuls of small little black books, tossing them onto the desk in front of her. He stared at her pointedly, and Lily rolled her eyes, picking up the top one. She flipped it open, and stared at the familiar scrawl, dictating out alchemical equations and expressions.

“Do you remember those?” Severus demanded. “You were going to do something extraordinary—recreate the Philosopher’s stone, combine it with—”

“You don’t need to summarize my notes. I remember them perfectly well,” Lily said. She carefully shut the book closed. “I’m not saying I won’t be back. I’m saying...not yet.”

“Because your son,” Severus said, voice flat. “Forgive me if I think that’s a foolish reason not to pursue knowledge and change the face of Healing forever.”

“Harry doesn’t need me watching over his shoulder when he’s on his own way of changing the face of Healing.”

“Riddle is mad, and will ultimately fail in his pursuit of doing whatever,” Severus said. Lily snorted, shaking her head. “What?”

“Your disdain is palpable. Your jealousy is astounding. Riddle is mad, but he’s a genius. And my son…” Lily said, her voice trailing off. Severus leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “Oh, Severus, have you ever seen Harry operate?”

“No. Why?” Severus asked.

Lily’s lips curled into a tiny smile. “Severus, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Harry is going to do great things, and he doesn’t need his mother casting a long shadow while he does it.”

DIAGNOSIS

“I can walk, you know. If you’d just let me—”

“Nope. Wheelchair or bed, Mum. Those are your options,” Neville said firmly. He looked over at Frank Longbottom who was grinning down at the top of Alice’s head as he pushed her wheelchair down the hallway.

"You heard him, Allie. Healer's orders," Frank said with that shit-eating grin. It was the first time that Neville had seen it since he'd burst into St. Mungo's, just a few days after Alice had been admitted for her devastating injuries. Neville felt something inside him deflate. Frank felt comfortable grinning like that because, *finally,* Alice was truly on the mend.

It had been a couple of false starts. She hadn’t woken up when she should’ve, at first. Dumbledore had assured Neville that she would wake when she was ready, but Neville had been terrified that she’d never be ready. And then, Neville had been terrified of the kind of damage that the Madness Curse *and* the Cruciatus would do. When she’d finally come around, Neville knew. There were scars. There was a bit of a wild look in her eyes that hadn’t been there before. She seemed more vigilant than ever, and at first, she hadn’t really recognized him.

And then, Neville had given her a gum wrapper—one of the first ones she'd ever given him—because, after every mission, she'd give him a gum wrapper as a mark that she was alive again. And then, she'd cried out his name and hugged him tightly.

"'Healer's orders'," she was mumbling. "I don't have to listen to my son's orders."

"But, you do have to listen to your Healer's," Frank reminded with a grin, nudging Neville in the side. Neville beamed.

"Well, he's not my Healer, is he?" Alice returned just as easily. Her eyes twinkled though, and she reached up to grab Neville's hand, squeezing hard. She was chomping on gum again, so she must feel more like herself. "You alright there, sweetheart?"

"I'm good, Mum," Neville reassured her.

He led the pair of them into the cafeteria, settling at one of the few empty tables. Frank sat down after rolling his wife to the head of the table and the trio looked at each other, all grinning.

"Now, tell us. How's it all been?" Frank asked, brightly.

"Brilliant. It's always brilliant," Neville said with a sweet smile.

"Brilliant," Alice crowed. "We haven't seen him in months, and it's still just 'brilliant'. Come on, Nev. *Details*."

"You don't give me details about your work," Neville pointed out. He regretted his words almost immediately. Alice's eyes went dark again and she looked almost lost.

"You don't want the grisly details, now, do you, Nev?"

"Probably not," Neville amended.

Alice hummed and only came back to herself when Frank reached for her hand and squeezed hard, anchoring her to the present. Slowly, Alice straightened and she looked over at Neville and forced a smile back on her face.

"Come on, Neville. Isn't there anything *juicy* happening here?" Alice asked with a twinkle.

Frank immediately straightened. "I heard some rumors."

"Wha--how?" Neville demanded.

"James Potter is a loud complainer," Frank said with a relaxed grin. "He was raving on to some of us about his son and...Tom Riddle, was it?"

"Oh, Merlin, if Harry heard…" Neville murmured under his breath, worried. He shook his head and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose at the very thought.

“What? Why? Tell me! I’ve been on a mission for *months* and I never go into the office,” Alice whined.

“Speaking of the office, Black says you’ve paperwork,” Frank said.

Alice’s eyes brightened with fury. “Paperwork! Can’t he see I’m an invalid? I’m *ill*. *Wounded*.”

“Mum, you’d never be an invalid. You could probably disarm at least six people in five minutes with a fork,” Neville said firmly. He’d never been unaware of how dangerous Alice Longbottom really was, but he’d learned *truly* when he was just a child.

Gran and the rest of the Longbottoms had thought he was only a Squib, and to force magic out of him, they’d gone about doing questionable things to him. Such as pushing off piers. Or dropping him out of windows. Luckily, he bounced when he fell out of the window, but *unluckily* for the rest of the Longbottoms, Alice had heard his screams. She had promptly...dealt with the situation while Frank had smirked and ignored their pleas of mercy. No one had bothered Neville since.

“Tell me about James Potter’s son and Tom Riddle. Who is Tom Riddle?” Alice demanded.

“His teacher,” Neville began.

Alice nearly squealed. “Oh, this *is* juicy. What *else*?”

“Neville?”

The three Longbottoms looked up. Neville immediately grinned at the young woman that stood there, looking far too uncertain. Astoria Greengrass twitched only once under Alice’s fearsome gaze, and Neville knew that as long as Astoria didn’t cower again, Alice would respect her.

“Neville, who’s this?” Frank asked.

Astoria cleared her throat and stepped forward, arm held out to Frank, pumping his hand once, and then she grabbed Alice’s, giving a firm handshake. Alice looked impressed.

“I am Astoria Greengrass, Neville’s best friend.”

“I take offense to that!” shouted another voice. Ron wheeled by, still dressed in his blacks, eyes narrowed into a glare at Astoria. “*I’m* Neville’s best friend.”

“*Non,* you are not. You are his...brother. It is different. Go away,” Astoria said, sniffing. Ron scoffed and crossed his arms, looking at Neville’s parents.

“I’m Ron Weasley. Neville’s *real* best friend,” Ron introduced.

Alice straightened. “You were there. You and Bellatrix. You saved me.”

Ron faltered, suddenly confronted by Alice's knowledge. He shifted nervously. "I...I...I well, yes," he stammered.

Frank beamed. "Thank you."

"Just doing my job," Ron said immediately, his cheeks flushing pink. Alice had a twinkle in her eyes, and she only nodded. Ron looked relieved by the fact that she hadn't vocalized her thanks.

"Neville, I need the list. Do you have it?" Astoria said, sounding apologetic. "I am sorry to cut your lunch short. I only need him for a moment."

"That's fine," Frank said with a grin. "Hey, Neville, while you speak with your 'best friend', we'll go and get something to eat. Do you want anything in particular?"

"Anything is good. Thanks, Da," Neville said.

Frank rolled Alice away, and Ron lingered, leaning against the edge of the table. Astoria glanced at him for just a moment.

"I am Healer-in-Charge of Romilda Vane," she explained to him, though she didn't need to. Ron didn't look even a little surprised.

"She came to my house once. She tried to get into a party we threw. Something was off about her, even then. Anyway, of course, you are. That's an honor, you know," Ron said as if he were only talking about the color of the sky. Astoria's eyes widened.

"What?" she asked.

"You're, like, the first trainee taking point. It's important. You're kinda chief trainee, at this point. Congratulations."

Astoria swallowed. "I did not...realize how important it was."

"Don't worry," Neville said, hurried. "You're good at what you do. You'll be fine."

"Yes," Astoria said brusquely. She cleared her throat and held her hand out. "The list, Neville."

Neville gave her the scroll of parchment and she unrolled it, eyes scanning the notes he'd taken.

"As far as I can tell, she's been taking Beautification Potions for some time. Probably a year or two. But, two different kinds. More recently, she's been taking a potion with...*unicorn* placenta. It's powerful stuff. Really addicting, however," Neville said.

Astoria nodded in agreement. "And...the skin?"

"She's also been using a Skin-Blemishing potion. It's not any recipe I know. Most have a mild side-effect and will last for forty-eight hours. This potion was strong and severe. It left scars

that she tried to cover with a Scar-Diminishing Serum. It didn't react well," Neville sighed, shaking his head. There was pity in his voice, and he tried to dispel it, immediately. "She's been taking Strengthening Solution, but not for very long. I don't expect any *serious* side effects. Maybe some chronic muscle pain."

Astoria nodded. Ron cleared his throat.

"Her hair is definitely a spell. Probably a combination of too much Sleakeazy's, and a glamour spell of some sort," Ron added his two cents.

Neville's eyes widened. "I thought it was Tinting Tincture, but you're probably right," Neville agreed. "The worst of it...she's been using body sculpting potions and the Draught of Peace."

"I know about the body sculpting potions. It was obvious. We conducted a physical after you left. Her muscle mass is warped, along with her rib cage," Astoria sighed. She already looked exhausted, but, Neville knew that if any trainee could pull off a case with such a large team of Healers and keep a cool head, it was Astoria Greengrass.

"But, the Draught of Peace?" Ron asked.

"She's an addict and she knows it," Astoria said softly. "She's not a dumb girl. I expect that she brewed quite a few of these potions on her own. She knew what she was putting into her body, and she did it anyway. That would make anyone anxious."

She was almost talking to herself at that point.

"Astoria?" Neville asked.

Astoria shook her head. "Thank you, Neville. I'll give this list to Draco and we'll have a team meeting sometime within the next few days after his first evaluation of her. We'll proceed from there," Astoria said firmly. She walked off without another word, not even bothering to acknowledge Ron to the two housemates' amusement.

"Draco? Is he the Mind Healer?" Neville asked.

Ron shrugged. "I hate the guy, but...he's good at his job, mate. We'll see what happens," Ron sighed. "How's your mum?"

The two looked at Frank and Alice as they giggled and bickered as the piled food high on their three plates. Alice was balancing a tray in her lap, clutching the silverware.

"She's okay. Intense. She's not going to be able to go back to the field for a while," Neville said, quietly. "She'll hate it."

"Why? She seems like she's mending well."

"Physically. She won't pass a psychological assessment. Not on the first go."

Ron's expression dropped. "Oh. Well...that makes sense. The Aurors should have a Mind Healer on retainer."

“They do. Dumbledore. But, my mum is stubborn. We’ll have to convince her,” Neville muttered. Ron nodded sagely. He crossed his arms as they watched the elder Longbottoms.

“Neville...are *you* alright?” Ron asked gently.

Neville winced. “Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” Neville asked nervously.

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “You’ll tell me if you aren’t alright, mate.”

It wasn’t a request.

“Yeah, I’ll tell you,” Neville whispered.

Neville wasn’t sure if he was lying just yet. Ron seemed to know that he wasn’t sure too.

DIAGNOSIS

“How are we feeling today, Cedric?” Harry asked as he walked into the room, keeping his bedside manner smile firmly in place. If Cedric saw any difference between Harry’s genuine smile and this false one, he didn’t show it.

“Pretty good, all things considered,” Cedric said.

Harry didn’t see a lie in the man’s face. Cedric looked better than he had in weeks—months, probably, going by the reports that they had seen prior to him being transferred into their care. His face was flushed with health, his eyes were brighter, and he had a healthy appetite, eating ravenously any time he was allowed to do so. Harry suddenly felt a renewed sense of hope.

“That’s really good, Cedric,” Harry said brightly. He turned to look at Tom, but the man wasn’t echoing his sentiments, simply looking at his notes with a serious expression on his face. It seemed that Harry wasn’t the only one to notice Tom’s lack of enthusiasm.

“What is it?” Amos Diggory asked.

Tom hummed. “Cedric, you are improving, but I hesitate to confirm that you’re on the mend.”

“What do you mean?” Cedric asked. He reached for his Dad’s wrist, squeezing hard to keep the older man in his seat, and calm.

“It’s only been a week. We will proceed with caution,” Tom decided. He sighed, looking between the older and younger Diggory. “This is very experimental, dangerous magic we’re

dealing in."

"How do you mean? Do you mean you're testing it on my Cedric?" Amos snapped.

Cedric sighed, looking both patient and slightly fed-up with his father's interruptions.

"Dad, that's the trial. We're in an experimental magic trial," Cedric reminded him. He turned back to the two Healers, a determined expression on his face. "This is Dark stuff, isn't it? Of course, it's dangerous."

"It's only considered Dark because we're dealing in Healing Transfiguration and potions, and we're binding the qualities together," Harry explained. He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked between the pair. Slowly, he looked back at Tom, waiting for the older Healer to explain. Tom was still looking at the charts, looking almost disconcerted. "Tom?"

Tom looked up sharply. "We've transfigured the heart itself. It no longer resembles a mass of muscle with several rows of teeth. It is an entirely new organism. As far as we can tell, the new organism is forming new arteries, allowing better blood flow and elevated oxygen levels that are closer to normal. The teeth are currently shifting to form a single mouth. This will minimize damage."

"But, there are still teeth?" Cedric clarified, wincing at the very idea that his heart still had vicious teeth jutting out of it.

"Yes, there are still teeth. But, the damage is contained," Harry added, giving a reassuring smile. Cedric smiled back.

Amos looked furious.

"You mean to tell me that he isn't cured. That you've just given him something *else*?" Amos snapped.

"This is a long and arduous process. I cannot pull a cure from the air, Mr. Diggory," Tom said dryly, his lips curled in distaste.

Amos Diggory didn't take Tom's words well. He shot up from his seat in an instant, ignoring his son's shouts to calm down. He stalked forward, vibrating with fury.

"You mark my words," Amos Diggory snarled, getting into Tom's face as much as he could despite being a few inches shorter. Tom didn't even flinch, staring down at the man, impassively. "If you don't get this right, I will *ruin* you."

"Is that right?" Tom asked dryly.

"I will *ruin* your career. You'll never be Head Healer of this hospital. You won't even be head of the department anymore," Diggory snarled.

Harry's hackles rose, and he pushed himself in between Diggory and Tom, his wand drawn. Tom finally showed an expression, his eyebrows raising in surprise. Harry kept his gaze

trained on Diggory, lips curled back.

“Mr. Diggory, I don’t want to call security on you, but I will if I have to. Please step outside,” Harry snapped. Amos’ eyes widened in fury.

“You dare—”

“I’m sorry, I was being polite. That *wasn’t* a request.”

Amos blinked, suddenly realizing the seriousness of what had just happened. He seemed to curl in on himself, and suddenly he looked very old and very tired. He took a step back and looked over at Cedric, a terrible smile on his face. Cedric looked back at his father, horrified and embarrassed.

“I’ll just step out for a breath of air,” Amos said softly, patting Cedric’s ankle. Cedric swallowed.

“Go home, Dad. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Cedric said.

Amos nodded. “Have a good day, Ced. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Indian takeaway. I got your food.” Harry’s eyes narrowed as he practically threw Hermione’s food down on the table in front of her, along with plastic utensils and a napkin. He did that every time it was his night to order food.

Except this time, Ron heard, *Here, you ungrateful twat.*

“Thank you.” Hermione carefully unfolded her napkin in her lap, like she was at a five-star restaurant.

Neville heard, *Fuck you, you bitch.*

There was an uncomfortable silence as the four tucked into their meal, Ron and Neville making more noise than usual to fill the cool void. Hermione and Harry were eating much slower, never breaking eye contact, simply glaring at one another with the fury of a thousand suns. Ron laughed nervously.

“So, uh, did you hear? Astoria Greengrass is Healer-in-Charge. There’s a girl with a Mod addiction,” Ron said, his voice uncommonly high. “Neville is on her team.”

“Is that so?” Hermione drawled. “How nice.”

“Oh, is it? I would’ve thought it beneath you. Seeing how you’re *published* and all,” Harry said, his voice flat. He viciously scooped out tikka masala and piled it on a piece of naan, and

then tore into it very much like a wild animal.

“Oh thank you *so* much for reminding me,” Hermione said, all false cheer. “I *am* published, aren’t I? They’re saying we’ve made medical history, did you know?”

“I did. I’m *so* happy for you,” Harry bit out.

Hermione looked more smug than usual. “I’m *glad.*”

Neville’s ears were quickly burning a bright pink and he cleared his throat.

“My, uh, my mum is doing well, you know,” Neville said. That seemed to have the intended effect; both Harry and Hermione had turned away from one another, looking at Neville with soft eyes. Ron let out a quick sigh of relief. “She asked about gossip at the hospital. It was quite funny.”

“Oh? What did she ask about?” Harry said with a quirked smile.

“Uh, you, actually. You and, uh, Riddle.”

Harry's smile disappeared almost instantly. Neville immediately mourned his misstep, and Hermione looked particularly vicious as if she smelled blood.

“Oh, Riddle? What did she have to say about *Riddle?*” Hermione hissed.

Harry scowled. “What are you doing, gossiping about me and *my* relationships?”

“What relationship?” Hermione asked coldly.

Harry flinched violently.

"Hermione—" Ron started, but he fell silent with a single look from his girlfriend. He sighed and pushed forward. "Enough. What's going on?"

There was a brief moment of sharp silence.

“Harry’s jealous of my success,” Hermione said coldly.

“Fuck you,” Harry snapped. He shoved his food away from him, spilling some of the sauce-covered rice onto the grimy tabletop. “Shut the—”

“You are, though, aren’t you?” Hermione hissed. “That’s why you said that Ron and I won’t work.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “You said that?” he snapped at Harry.

Harry trembled with fury. “Fuck *you*! You asked Hermione. Why do you even care what I think?”

“Why do I—” Hermione trailed off, shaking her head in disgust. “I don’t even know. You’re a *mess,* Harry Potter.”

“Enough!” Ron cried out. Neville’s face was bright pink, but slowly, the color was draining away.

Hermione ignored her boyfriend. "You're killing yourself trying to heal a patient that's already half-dead. Your ex is swanning around as if he doesn't give a shit about you but will call you to sate his every whim, and you don't have enough self-respect to say no. You go around pretending that it doesn't *kill* you inside that there are still people who call you names behind your back. I know all of these things about you because you're a mess, and I cheer you on *anyway*. And the one time...the *one* time, I ask for you to support me, you *can't*. Because you’re *jealous*! Finally, I’m not as dark and twisty as you, and you can’t be *happy* for me.”

Harry had fallen back into his seat and sunk lower and lower with each word, flinching violently from the truth, because, really, he didn’t know what to do, if he didn’t have Hermione. And Hermione was good and whole and happy now. She didn’t need him to commiserate in misery with, anymore. She had Ron and her success and Vance. She had her shit together. And God, she was right. Hermione was *always* right.

Harry was a fucking *mess.* And he should’ve known that he’d always need Hermione more than she needed him.

“Okay,” Harry said quietly. He looked down at the table and slowly stood up, refusing to look into her eyes, where only wild rage remained. He walked away, swallowing hard and then hesitated by the door. “For the record...I am so proud of you, Hermione.”

He disappeared through the swinging door without another word. A prickling silence fell over the kitchen. Hermione panted like an angry bull, shaking with adrenaline.

“What was that?” Neville whispered.

Like a marionette whose strings were cut, Hermione collapsed in her chair and buried her face in her hands. “I keep saying the wrong thing,” she whispered.

“Go say you’re sorry, then,” Ron said gently.

Hermione barked out a laugh. “We don’t say sorry to each other. It’s...it’s too much for us. We just move on. But, I said...I said something so shitty early. I said...I *implied* that Riddle didn’t love him because he chose his work over Harry.”

“*Jesus*, Hermione,” Ron muttered, shaking his head. “Fucking mess, that is.”

“We don’t say sorry to each other,” Hermione repeated.

Neville finally looked up from his plate, his eyes like flint. “Maybe it’s time you start.”

DIAGNOSIS

Draco lingered outside, pacing back and forth nervously. He could just hear the muffled tones, quiet mumbling that was periodically interrupted by a brash, irritated voice that could only belong to the patient. Draco's patient.

Romilda Vane.

There was a brief moment of silence again, and just as Draco passed in front of the door for what felt like the millionth time, the door swung open and Astoria, Luna, and Rolf Scamander filed out in quick succession. They were all quite silent, looking down at their notes. Draco hated it.

"Well?" he demanded.

Rolf Scamander looked shocked at being addressed, despite the fact that he had literally come from the continent just for this consult. Luna would have no one else, Astoria had explained, and Rolf had been all too happy to use several international Portkeys to assist the lovely Healer. Draco nearly rolled his eyes. The man should just ask Luna out and be done with it. They were already constantly making moon eyes at one another.

"She isn't a creature hybrid. I thought perhaps, a Winged Humanoid Fae cross-breed, but no. She's simply reacted to a potion's ingredient. Most probably an excess of Veela hair. The wings resembled the Veela's wings," Rolf said. He sounded apologetic about the whole thing too, despite the relief that Draco could clearly see on Astoria's face. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more assistance, Luna."

"Oh, you've done marvelously, Rolf. Thank you so much for coming with such haste. I'm sure the nargles and wrackspurts chased you down, but you came anyway," Luna said with a brilliant smile. Rolf smiled back, just as enamored.

Draco cleared his throat, interrupting the *sweet* moment. "She is awake, then?" he asked.

"And irate," Astoria warned. He ignored the look in her eyes--*do not screw this up for me, Draco*, it said.

Draco promptly ignored it. "Perfect," he said with a smirk.

He sauntered past the three and strut inside, slamming the door behind him. He straightened his robes, looking as haughty as he possibly could, smoothing his hand over his blonde hair. He approached the end of the bed, staring right into Romilda Vane's eyes.

She looked exactly as he expected her to.

Romilda Vane looked tiny in her body, all bones and tight skin. Skeletal and sunken. Her hair was pulled back in a limp ponytail, so thin that he could see patches of her scabbing bald head. Her fingers were long and spindly. In all honesty, she reminded him of a human dementor, except for the eyes.

Her eyes burned bright with rage.

Draco knew all about rage. He could make this work.

“Hello, Miss Vane. I’ll be your Mind Healer, Draco Malfoy,” he said firmly.

“I don’t need a *fucking* Mind Healer,” she hissed, her voice akin to a death rattle. She clutched her blankets tight to her chest, and he could see how cold, she was, even with the way that Warming Charms had been layered on her.

“What *do* you need, Miss Vane?” Draco asked, making his way to the chair set up next to her bedside. He crossed his legs, leaning forward, eyes trained on her. She was staring at him, viciously bird-like.

“My friends. My potions. Out of here.”

“Unfortunately, we can’t release you,” Draco said, sounding as if it wasn’t unfortunate at all.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not of age, and your parents signed something that says that you will be under the care and supervision of myself and Healer Greengrass until we deem you physically and mentally fit to leave,” Draco said firmly. Romilda’s lips curled back into a sneer, and he could imagine what was on her tongue—something scathing and cruel. Something that might’ve come out of him when he was still at Beauxbatons and hurting.

“What does that even mean?” Romilda said, instead, and there was a wicked sort of triumph in her eyes, when he started, surprised by what she’d said.

Draco leaned back in his chair. “You are not a fool, Romilda Vane.”

“Oh, I’m not?” Romilda snarled.

“No. You are very smart, I think. You brewed all of the potions yourself. You taught yourself those spells. You crafted yourself into what you believed to be the perfect young woman,” Draco said calmly, inspecting his nails. He could feel her ire rising—he wasn’t looking at her, wasn’t paying attention to her, and that would infuriate her all the more.

“From the way your *friends* speak, I am very stupid. I am a dumb little girl that believes in fairytales and tried to make myself look like one. I am dumb for using those spells and potions.”

Draco smiled grimly.

“No. You are very intelligent, I think. Yes, you took those potions. But, you took the Draught of Peace too.”

Romilda fell silent for a moment, nostrils flaring. Her nose looked misshapen—most likely a deviated septum. Quietly, she whispered, “You think I’m smart?”

“Yes. You know what else I think?” Draco asked. He didn’t wait for her to respond. “I think you are an *addict.* I think you have a disease. And we can rebuild your body. We can fix your hair and your nose. We can tend to your scars and build your muscle mass. But, there is only *one* person who can fix your mind.”

Romilda scoffed. “You?”

“No,” Draco snarled. Romilda jumped, staring at him wild-eyed. Draco’s expression softened. He leaned forward, staring at her with narrowed eyes. “You.”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry finally wrapped up his paperwork, checking out the last patient in the regular Spell Damage ward on his list for the day. He smiled as the patient signed the discharge papers, and he nodded, ignoring the murmured gratitude of the family. Quietly, he slipped out of the room, letting out a long breath of relief.

That had been emotionally taxing. All of those living patients and not single one of them was really his. They were McGonagall’s or one of the other Healers’ patients. All of his patients ended up in the morgue.

Except for the one he had now.

Cedric Diggory, who had against all odds, made it for four months with acute Hearteater Virus, and now, was responding positively to the treatment plan. Harry’s lips curled into a smile.

He hated allowing himself to hope. But, he couldn’t help it anymore. Cedric was doing *well*.

Briskly, Harry made his way to Tom’s office, already shuffling the discharge papers back into order for the last sign off from Tom. Sometimes, he felt less like the assistant on Tom’s project, and more like the man’s secretary. His time in the magical theatre always made up for it though, especially when Tom let him take charge. Harry didn’t bother knocking on the man’s door, just checking it open with his hip.

“Tom, these need your—”

Harry came to a stop and he blinked rapidly at the sight before him.

Tom was sitting at his desk, as per usual, but it was the two other occupants in the room that threw Harry off spectacularly. Bellatrix Black and Rodolphus Lestrange looked quite comfortable—with Bellatrix perched on the edge of Tom’s desk, pouring herself a cup of tea, and Rodolphus lounging across the long sofa, legs tossed over the arm.

“Potter,” Bellatrix drawled, a strange light in her dark eyes.

“Mediwizards Lestrange and Black,” Harry said coldly. Slowly, he walked into the room, his nostrils flared as he looked at Tom. Tom didn’t look too disturbed by the others’ presence, and he gave a one-shouldered shrug at Harry’s questioning look. “Tom, these need your signature.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Tom said, taking the discharge papers from him.

Rodolphus hummed. “You have him doing your paperwork like a sexy secretary now, Tom?”

Harry’s cheeks flushed. “Excuse me—”

“How cliche,” Bellatrix teased wickedly, as Tom sighed, going towards his papers.

“Enough,” he drawled. “Harry, how is our patient doing?”

“I was going to check on him now. No red sparks in about a week. When can we say officially that he’s improved?” Harry asked as he walked around the desk and searched in one of the drawers for Cedric’s file. Tom waved his wand, Summoning it straight into Harry’s hands.

“If his vitals are still stable, mark him as improved,” Tom decided. Harry nodded and slowly turned to face Tom, staring down at him. Tom stared at him, his lips quirked into a tiny smile. “We’re making progress.”

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Harry muttered.

Tom reached out, squeezing his wrist once. “I think I do.”

Harry bit his lip and looked away, glancing between Bellatrix and Rodolphus suspiciously. They looked far too interested in Harry and Tom for Harry’s own good. Harry took a step back, taking a deep breath, and a brief flash of annoyance crossed Tom’s face before his expression smoothed out once more.

“How *is* your project going, Tom?” Bellatrix asked.

Harry bit his bottom lip in order to hold his tongue. Bellatrix Black had no right to ask that. Bellatrix had threatened the project from the start just because she didn't get what she wanted. Bellatrix was a bitch that treated Harry like shit because her ex-fiance preferred him to her. She was the worst. But, Tom had allowed her into his office. Tom was *apparently* friends with her again.

“Well. We’ve made progress,” Tom said absently as he reviewed the discharge papers.

Rodolphus hummed again. “You should conduct more research.”

“All we do is research. I think we’re doing just enough,” Harry snapped, unable to help himself. Rodolphus looked surprised and then, thrilled.

“Of course,” he said placatingly. “But, other avenues should be explored too, yes?”

“I’ve always found a good meal stimulates the mind,” Bellatrix said pointedly, nostrils flaring.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Really? I’ve always found starvation does the same.”

With his eyes, he screamed *die, you heinous cow.* Bellatrix smirked back at him.

“Tom has always worked better after a meal. A meal and then a night of brainstorming. How about that, Tom?” Rodolphus asked. Tom hummed, not even truly paying attention. “Then, it’s settled.”

“What’s settled?” Tom asked.

“We’re doing dinner and then a night of brainstorming,” Harry barked. He took a step back, already feeling overwhelmed by the intensity that Lestrange and Black stared at him with. Tom looked up, and his burgundy eyes softened again. “Lobby when I get off?”

“Of course. I’ll meet you. We’ll discuss Cedric’s progress then,” Tom said softly. Harry nodded and slowly walked out of the office, ignoring the mediwizards’ eyes on him as he made his way to Cedric’s room.

As soon as Harry was out of the office, he relaxed. Rodolphus and Bellatrix made him so uncomfortable with their staring and strange comments. The way that Tom had been so comfortable around them reminded Harry uncomfortably of his own housemates, and the disastrous dinner from the night before. He could still remember the hurt in Hermione’s voice when he had said those horrible things to her.

You won’t work, he’d said to her, even knowing all her of insecurities. Even knowing how hard she’d worked for what she had, and how far she’d come, he’d said that to her. He’d thrown her mistakes back into her face, like a coward.

Don’t say such things just because Riddle chose the work over you. *Ron loves* me.

That’s what she’d said back, in the same anger that he had spat those terrible words at her just because she had her shit together and he...did not. Harry took a deep breath.

“Enough,” he whispered to himself. “Get your head in the game, Harry Potter.”

He clutched Cedric’s file to his chest and knocked, hoping that Amos Diggory wasn’t there to cause another *fucking* altercation. Harry pushed the door open and was relieved that Cedric was alone. The young man was going through a well-loved copy of Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry was reminded that Cedric was almost the Seeker for Puddlemere United.

“Hello, Cedric. How are you feeling today?” Harry asked.

Cedric looked up and smiled. “I’m doing alright. A little heartburn this morning, but you told me to expect that, yeah?”

"Yes, I did," Harry confirmed. He pulled his wand and casted the diagnostics charm with a flourish. "As you said, just heartburn. And your heart is continuing to change shape. It's transforming quite nicely. Vitals are *strong*. I think we can *definitively* say that you're improving but, Healer Riddle and I will most likely conduct a very thorough chest examination within the next few weeks ago. We don't want to go through this anymore blind than we have to."

Cedric nodded in agreement. He looked hesitant for a second before he pointed to the chair.

“My father is in board meetings all day,” Cedric said and Harry winced. That meant Blaise was also around. He’d have to be careful to hide from him in a cupboard or something. He hadn’t seen the man since Florence. “Can we talk, Healer Potter?”

“Harry,” the Healer corrected, but he sat down in the bedside chair anyway. “What’s going on, Cedric?”

Cedric cleared his throat, and he looked at Harry with suspiciously clear eyes. Cedric was disconcerting like that, as if he were so utterly at peace with his condition, that he felt like he could die at any moment and be content.

“I might die still,” Cedric said firmly.

Harry winced hard. “Maybe. But, right now, Cedric, it looks like—”

“I know. I’m improving,” Cedric interrupted. “But, we don’t know. You said it yourself. You’re going in blind. This is a brand new method and I don’t understand it. And my dad doesn’t understand it. That’s why he yelled yesterday.”

Harry tried to suppress his sour expression but couldn’t quite manage it. “I know,” he said sharply.

“He shouldn’t have gotten in Healer Riddle’s face. It was rude and inexcusable. But...if I die, my dad won’t have anyone left. My mum died a few years ago. I’m his only son. He’ll be alone,” Cedric said calmly and Harry swallowed hard. He wouldn’t wish being alone on anyone, not even someone as unpleasant as Amos Diggory. “But, I think I could get him to...calm down. To understand.”

“Okay. How?” Harry asked patiently.

“Can you just...tell me about how this works? What is happening? I feel like...since I’ve gotten sick, I don’t know what’s happening in my own body. Can you understand how terrifying that might be?” Cedric whispered, his voice cracking and for the first time, Harry saw all of Cedric’s composure drain away. Harry’s heart ached and slowly he nodded.

"Yes. I understand," Harry whispered. "I can explain. The original Hearteater Virus is based in a curse, as we understand it. We had to work backward to move forward, you see. The curse is quite wicked—a terrible mix of transfigurative magic, dark magic, and a bastardization of Healing magic. The Healing magic encourages the body to attempt to protect herself, but it does so in a way that is akin to...a cancer, of sorts. So, we took the transformative nature and continued to push it forward, transforming your heart and reorganizing it as an organism to do the least amount of damage."

Cedric nodded, eyes wide, but Harry could see the confusion there.

“It’s all still very theoretical,” Harry murmured gently. He leaned forward, grabbing Cedric’s hand and holding it tightly. “But, we’re working really hard, Cedric. You and your dad have

to know that. We will work until your very last breath, I swear. And yes, you might die. Anyone can die. But, not without a good damned fight."

Cedric's lips twitched and he nodded, squeezing back.

"You have conviction, Harry Potter," he said quietly. "I think we would have been friends, in another life."

Harry laughed, unable to help his urge to tease. "So, we're not friends?"

Cedric beamed. "I guess we are now."

Harry stood, finally releasing Cedric's hand and he realized that he still had Cedric's file in hand. He cleared his throat and offered it to Cedric. Cedric's eyes widened.

"Look...your dad loves you a lot. I can see that. But, he can't keep...doing this. Causing issues. It'll start affecting your health and I can't have that. So, why don't you take a look at these notes, and explain them to your Dad. The whole process. He can take notes, write down any questions he may have, and if it's okay with you, we can schedule a meeting and he can ask those questions, and then, I'll take the file back and we can move forward with treatment," Harry said, unable to help himself.

Tom wouldn't be pleased about Harry offering a meeting with him, but he would probably prefer that to another untimely outburst from Diggory. He had reacted the coolly the day before, but Harry thought that Tom had something particularly wicked up his sleeves when push came to shove.

Cedric beamed. "That sounds great, Harry. Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome, Cedric. Ring me if you need me."

Harry briskly walked out of the room and started towards Tom's office before he turned away. He'd go to the pharmacy to organize Cedric's potions for the day.

Anything was better than subjecting himself to another confrontation with Bella Black.

He could only take so much of her in a day.

DIAGNOSIS

Ron looked between the four of them. None of them would look at one another. Hermione and Harry hadn't looked at each other since the night before—the night that they wouldn't speak of. Neville was staring in his cupboard blankly, probably preoccupied with his mother. And here, Ron was caught between, nervous about another fight breaking out over the dinner table.

Really, it was no way to live.

"Harry?" Ron called. Harry hummed but didn't react in any other way, carefully folding his hunter green Healing robes again, inspecting it for any stray spots of blood. When he was satisfied, he tucked it away in his cupboard and began to pack his bag. "Hermione?"

“Yes, Ronald?” Hermione asked briskly, packing and repacking her satchel, tucking away her Healing robes to be washed at home.

Ron took a step back. She was calling him ‘Ronald’. Maybe not.

"Neville?" Ron asked. Neville jumped so hard, he slammed his head into the cupboard door. Hannah rushed over, cooing over him, and already out to Summon a bruise paste. Ron sighed and took a step forward. "Does anyone have a radio?"

“Why would we have a radio?” Smith barked.

“Okay, you bloody berk. It was just a question,” Ron snarled.

Padma Patil looked unimpressed with the lot of them. Bored, she drawled, “There’s one in the broom cupboard over there. It’s really old.”

“It’ll do,” Ron said with a wave of his wand. The broom cupboard door flew open and an old dusty radio shot out from the closet. Ron caught with a huff and he examined it. The dial was cracked and the little glass was smeared with dirt and dust, but with a tap of the wand, it turned on. Ron settled it on the bench between the four of them and slowly, he turned his wand, dialing into their favored radio station—a Muggle one at that.

Harry startled at the familiar guitar riff.

When I get to the bottom, I go back to the top of the slide.

Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride.

‘Til I get to the bottom and I see you again!

Ron slowly began to jump in time, headbanging. Hermione slowly turned to him, staring at him wild-eyed, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, Weasley?” Draco sneered.

Neville stepped forward, pulling away from Hannah. Slowly, he began to tap his foot. Harry swallowed.

Helter skelter! Helter skelter! Helter skelter!

"Dancing it out," Harry murmured.

Ron nodded and he began to wave his hands over his head, jumping up and down.

Neville was the first to join him, jumping up and down as Ron began to air guitar, dropping to his knees and plucking imaginary strings, stressing imaginary frets. Hermione threw back her head and let out a howling laugh.

"*Tell me, tell me, tell me your answer*

You may be a lover but you ain't no dancer," Hermione howled.

"*Look out!"* Harry roared. "*Helter skelter! She's coming down fast! Yes, she is!*"

The other trainees jumped, all staring at them with wide eyes. Neville began to bang on his imaginary drums. Harry and Hermione bounced to the music. Harry reached forward, turning the volume up as high as possible until the music boomed through the room, one Beatles song melting into another song.

Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?

No escape from reality.

Hermione and Harry gasped, looking at each other with wide eyes. Ron and Neville grinned at the pair, nodding happily.

Open your eyes

Look up to the skies and see

"*I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy*!" Neville howled in time with Freddie Mercury, terribly off-tune, but oh so perfect. Harry let out a cackling laugh.

Because I'm easy come, easy go

A little high, little low

Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me, to me.

The quartet began to mime the piano as they swayed to the music, howling out the words. Harry stumbled into Ron's side on a particularly dramatic flourish. Ron threw his arm around Harry's shoulder as he warbled, "*Mama! Didn't mean to make you cry! If I'm not back again this time tomorrow! Carry on, carry on.*"

Zacharias Smith looked less than pleased. "What is this nonsense?"

"Is this...is this Muggle music?" Astoria added curiously from her spot spectating.

The housemates hadn't seemed to hear them.

"*MAMA! OOOOOH!"* Hermione roared. "*I don't wanna die!*"

Ron released Harry again to mime the air guitar, headbanging and squirming to the sound of the music, his face drawn into the most dramatic expression. Neville howled, cheering in excitement as if Ron really was making the music himself. And then all of a sudden, the four went still.

"*I see a little silhouetto of a man*

Scaramouch, Scaramouch will you do the fandango

Thunderbolt and lightning very very frightening me!" the four screamed in one another's face.

Harry and Hermione shouted, "*Galileo*."

Ron and Neville returned the favor until it devolved into laughter, nearly drowning out the music.

"*Oh mama mia, mama mia, mama mia let me go*

Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me

For me

For me!" the four screamed, their throats feeling raw.

And then Harry turned to Hermione and began to jump up and down, howling out like a wild animal. The door burst open, but the four had no eyes for the Healers that had approached at the loud sounds emerging. Hermione and Harry reached for another at nearly the same time, eyes trained on one another.

They jumped up and down in time with the music. Out of breath, Harry asked, "Hermione, why do you care what I think?"

Hermione grabbed his hand, twirling beneath it, eyes wide.

"Because you're my person," Hermione confirmed. "And if I'm gonna do this with him—all of this, really—be whole and healthy and be a warm, gooey person, I need you. I need you onboard. I need you to cheer me on. Because you're only one who knows me, really knows me. I need you to pretend that I can do this, even if you don't believe. Because if you abandon me now, I will never make it. *We'll* never make it."

And Harry stopped dancing. So did Hermione. Even as Neville and Ron kept jumping up and down, staring at them, ignoring the other trainees that probably thought that they were *insane*.

"Fuck, Hermione. I need you too. I'm always going to need you. You'll make it work. You'll do it. You *can* do it," Harry whispered, and he sincerely believed it.

Hermione saw it too. Her lips curled into a bright smile and she threw her arms around Harry, hugging him tightly. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too. We're a pair of emotionally-challenged arseholes," Hermione whispered in his ear.

"We are," Harry laughed. "Now, go away."

Hermione squeezed hard before pulling away and turning towards Ron, a determined glint in her eyes. Ron looked surprised to be suddenly under all of Hermione's attention.

Nothing really matters

Anyone can see

Nothing really matters nothing really matters to me

"Ronald Weasley," Hermione barked.

Ron's eyes widened. "Yes?"

"I love you."

Ron's mouth dropped open, and Neville blinked, grinning madly. Neville shoved his shoulder.

"You berk. Say something," Neville urged.

Anyway the wind blows.

"You, I love too."

Ron grinned as he reached forward Hermione and tugged her close, pressing their lips together in a firm kiss. Harry threw his head back and laughed, clapping madly. McGonagall and Dumbledore stood in the doorway with vastly different reactions—one scowling and the

other beaming. And hovering just behind them was Tom Riddle without an expression on his face at all.

“You four are mad. You deserve one another,” Draco said with a sneer.

Neville laughed, looping his arm through Harry’s. “Yeah, we do,” Neville agreed.

Harry looked over his shoulder, grinning. When he looked at Tom, his smile never faltered.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry grinned as Ron and Hermione laughed and whispered to each other, walking just ahead of him. They looked so in love, different from how they usually bickered—and they still bickered, for sure. It was their weird way of flirting. But, this...this looked so innocent and real that it made Harry’s heart ache, and not with the strange sickening jealousy that had threatened to overwhelm him before.

“Are you coming, Harry?” Neville asked, looking over his shoulder. Hannah glanced over hers too, smiling back at Harry. Harry shook his head.

"No. I've got dinner and work to do tonight. You go on without me," Harry called. Neville nodded, waving goodnight as the two pairs went off to the Apparition Zone. Harry walked towards the waiting area, hovering as he looked around.

“That was quite the show, Harry.”

Harry looked up at Albus Dumbledore and grinned. The old man beamed down at him, whistling the melody of Bohemian Rhapsody to himself, as if he had soaked the song into his skin.

“It’s a good song, isn’t it?” Harry said with a grin.

Dumbledore nodded. “Oh, yes. Your mother introduced me to Queen when she was just a trainee here. I grew to be quite the fan.”

Harry hummed, with lips turning upwards even harder. He couldn’t help it.

“I never knew my mum to like Queen. She was always more of a Fleetwood Mac fan,” Harry said with a shrug. If Dumbledore was confused by the names of Muggle bands, he didn’t look it, only nodding sagely as if he understood exactly what Harry was saying.

“Ah, yes. That sounds quite like her, I think,” Dumbledore agreed. “Now, tell me, my boy, how are the trials going?”

Harry hummed, arms crossed over his chest. “Better, I think. Much better.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dumbledore said. “I have seen you looking quite dejected lately. It doesn’t suit you.”

Harry sighed, feeling more tired than he had in quite some time. Whenever he thought back to all of his patients, Katie Bell emerged first in his mind, and he felt a pang of personal loss as if she had been a limb. Or his heart. Or something essential to the person he had been before. The person from before had been a child. The person he was now knew death well.

"Yeah, it was rough for a while. But...this time, I think we're getting it right," Harry said, allowing himself to hope. He crossed his arms over his chest and grinned even as he looked around again, waiting almost impatiently. "At least, we better have. Amos Diggory is our patient's father. He just doesn't seem to understand that the Hearteater Virus isn't a bad case of the Black Cat Flu."

“The Hearteater Virus?”

Harry looked up at Dumbledore. Dumbledore was staring at him like he’d seen something terrible.

“Yes. Cedric Diggory has it. Why?” Harry asked slowly.

Before Dumbledore could answer, a voice called out, “Harry.”

Harry looked up at Tom and he smirked at the man. Tom rolled his eyes at him and sighed as he approached the pair of them.

"You're late. I looked so stupid hanging around for you, Healer Dumbledore felt so much that he had the need to talk to me and put me out of my misery," Harry teased. Tom rolled his eyes even harder and Harry let out a bright laugh, sighing to himself. "Are we off?"

“Oh, are you two…” Dumbledore trailed off.

Harry winced and shook his head, forcing a smile. “Nope. No, no, and no. We just have work to do. A quick bite and then it’s back to the board. Have a good night, Healer Dumbledore.”

“You too, Harry,” Dumbledore said just as cheerfully. His smile softened, as did his eyes when he looked over at Tom. Tom frowned at him, waiting for the man’s words, defensive as usual. “Have a good night, Tom. Good luck on the Hearteater Virus.”

And just for a second, Tom’s burgundy eyes flashed with an emotion that was gone far too fast for Harry to decipher.

“Thank you, Albus,” Tom said. Slowly, he turned to Harry. “I want Italian.”

“What? No! We’re doing something fast. We’ve work to do.”

“All I do all day is work. I want real food.”

Harry scoffed, and stomped away, trying to hide his smile. Tom looked over his shoulder once. Albus hadn’t stopped smiling. Tom looked away.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, everybody. I wanted to get this out by the 16th, but, my personal laptop battery died. I finished this chapter last week, but all of my editing apps are on my personal laptop, so I had no way of really checking my grammar and what not until I got on my work laptop during a lunch break. So, here it is: late. Sorry about that. If I'm late responding to comments, I promise I'll get to them as soon as I have a laptop again. But, please leave comments. They motivate me!

ANYWAY, I am going on vacation quite soon, before I'm back off to school. However, I hope to have the next two chapters up before I leave. I'll be leaving you on a cliffhanger, but...oh well? Hopefully, it'll generate some really nice comments to come back to as I won't be able to check my email the entire time of my vacation. The next chapter should be out by the 30th, and then, after that, by the 13th. After that? Probably later August, maybe even September. I just know that this should all be wrapped up by October.

EDIT: Please don't leave unkind comments. This your one and only warning. I will be deleting them hear on out. Don't go to the comments to complain that you don't like a character if it's not constructive or that you're getting tired of my story. Otherwise, it just comes across as mean/rude. If you don't like what you're reading, just stop reading. It's as easy as that. Thanks.

Winged Humanoid Fae: (mentioned)
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/145375437373/winged-humanoid-fae-there-are-it-is-known-a-wide

Cor Cordis (described):
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/128141152465/cor-cordis-close-cousin-of-the-deadly-hearteater

The Hearteater Virus credited to themonsterblogofmonsters

Physical Modification Potions: http://www.hogwartsishere.com/courses/PTNS-401/

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry stood in front of the mirror, twisting and turning to admire his physique as he readied himself for his late-start to the day.

“Your arse looks good in those jeans,” Hermione commented from her perch on the edge of the bed. She elbowed Ron in his side. “Doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” Ron allowed. He turned his attention back to the chessboard between the two of them. “Now, come on. Move. You’re holding up the game.”

“I’m *strategizing,”* Hermione insisted even as she continued to frown at Harry. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to, Harry. And we know that you don’t.”

“I do have to go,” Harry said stubbornly. “I’m not going to flake on him.”

He said it in such a way that it was clear that he expected Blaise to flake on him. It wouldn’t be the first time: Harry had tried to break up with Blaise again last week when the man had flaked on a lunch date, but he’d apologized with tickets to a Puddlemere United Quidditch match, and Harry was a hoe for Quidditch. He’d ignored Hermione’s judgey eyes as best as he could, and he was getting quite good at that.

“Where is he taking you today? Paris? Prague?” Ron teased. He poked Hermione in the shoulder. “I’m giving you ten more seconds or I win by default.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “You can’t do that,” she snapped. But, then, she followed it with a grudging, “Knight to E4.”

Ron scoffed. “Really, Hermione? Attempting to trick my queen into taking your knight so your measly pawn can conquer me? Do you think I’m thick?”

Harry laughed. “Yes.”

Ron made a rude gesture at him that just made Harry laugh harder.

“You didn’t answer the question,” Hermione snapped. She balked. “You took my rook!”

“You weren’t paying attention,” Ron said with a grin.

“He’s taking me to Diagon Alley,” Harry said. “Some cafe that he wants to be seen at. There’s a column in Witch Weekly about him. And people like him. He’s famous for being rich or something.”

“Sounds obnoxious,” Ron drawled.

Harry gave a tired smile. “Isn’t it?”

“You should just break up with him,” Hermione suggested. She was carefully examining the chessboard again from every angle, this time ignoring all signs of Ron’s waning patience. “You don’t want him anymore.”

“I don’t. But...I don’t know. It’s complicated,” Harry sighed. It really wasn’t.

His mother’s advice constantly rang in his ears, but then Harry was eating good food instead of Indian takeaway, and seeing someone that *wasn’t* constantly at the hospital, though that was becoming something of the past. For some reason, Zabini felt the need to always be at St. Mungo’s, though he’d learned his lesson about interfering with any of Harry’s patients.

“He’s a waste of time and energy,” Hermione said dismissively. “A pompous asshole that tosses his pretty hair and flashes his expensive robes. I’ve heard him talking about you at the hospital to his Board friends, sometimes. He treats you like arm candy when it’s the other way around.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. Hermione messily moved her bishop and cursed, losing the second bishop.

“I used to be arm candy,” Harry observed quietly. “Everyone wanted to be with me.”

“Well, now you’re that psycho Healer slut that’s getting ready to achieve greatness,” Ron said. “Check.”

“Thank you, Ron. You’re so supportive,” Harry said dryly.

“I live to serve.”

Harry snorted. “Where’s Neville? I want to know his opinion,” Harry said even though really he just wanted to pose in front of Neville and get the other man as flustered as possible. He needed some sort of amusement before he went to what would be another *boring* date.

“He actually had an early shift. Something about harvesting Mandrakes,” Hermione said.

“Check. Checkmate.”

“Fuck!” Hermione groaned, falling back onto the bedspread, arms falling to her side. Ron laughed triumphantly, leaning over to press a kiss to her lips, hovering over her.

Harry fought a smile. They were adorable. Hermione would die if he ever said that out loud, though.

“You’re both adorable,” Harry said softly.

Hermione scowled through the kiss, flipping him the bird. Harry cackled.

“Don’t you have a date to be on?” Hermione asked once Ron pulled away.

“What does the winner get?” Harry asked instead.

Ron grinned wolfishly. “I get to tie *her* up instead of the other way around. For once. And we’ve got about an hour before we have to go to work,” he said, giving Hermione the eye, his gaze lingering on the soft swell of her cleavage, the skin where her t-shirt rode up above the waistband of her jeans. His fingers brushed across the brown skin.

Harry blanched.

“Not in *my* bed. Get out!” Harry shouted. Hermione cackled as she jumped off the bed, linking her fingers with Ron as she dragged him from the room. “You are both the *worst!*”

Harry didn’t really mean it. He sighed, stepping back from his reflection.

He was going to break up with Blaise today.

But, he was going to get one last free lunch out of the fucker before doing so.

DIAGNOSIS

“You look lovely, Harry,” Blaise said gently as they awkwardly picked at their lunches.

Harry smiled briefly before redirecting his gaze down to his club sandwich.

“I haven’t seen you in quite some time,” Zabini continued. “But, no matter. I’ve been quite busy with the board, especially after our lucrative fundraiser, and I’m sure that *you’re* busy with Cedric and everything.”

Harry nodded. “I am.”

He said nothing else, picking at the limp lettuce and fatty meat. This was supposed to be a gourmet cafe. His sandwich alone was nearly ten galleons. It was absurd. Zabini was staring at him with a strange expression. Harry leaned back in his seat, staring at him blankly.

“Harry, dear, this isn’t working out, is it?” Blaise asked, so full of arrogant condescension that Harry had to remind himself that murder was *illegal* and that it would look horrifying for his father if he decided to commit murder and get himself sentenced to a lifetime in Azkaban.

Harry nodded. “No, it’s not. I think—”

“I think we should break up.”

And Harry froze. Because that had been exactly what he’d wanted to say. Except, he hadn’t gotten the chance. Because Zabini had said it *first.*

"That's what I was going to say," Harry said, his voice chilly. Zabini didn't even seem to realize that Harry was close to gouging out his eyeballs with his dessert spoon.

"Really? I never got the sense that you were dissatisfied with our arrangement," Zabini said, and Harry let out a shocked whoop of laughter. Zabini continued on as if he hadn't heard anything. "I, on the other hand...well, Harry, I know you're quite intelligent, but couldn't you tell?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Tell. What."

"You are a little emotional. I believe you're far more attached to me than I am to you. And you're quite beautiful, but you lack any cultured interests. All we talk about is the hospital. And though I did want to educate you in high culture, the final straw was this, my dear: I don't think that we're...sexually compatible," Zabini said as if he were listing out groceries.

With each insult, Harry's eyes widened. He cleared his throat, and let out a laugh. He couldn't believe this was happening. This wasn't *happening*.

Harry guffawed. "No shit, Zabini. What was your first clue?" Harry huffed. He shook his head. "This is unbelievable. You're dumping *me*. You're dumping me because y—"

"You're boring in bed, Harry."

Harry froze, dropping his spoon with a noisy clatter.

Harry had had a lot of sex in his day. He loved sex. Sex was fun and stress-relieving. He'd had some really good sex, and he had been known to know how to have a good time. But, he'd never been called boring in his entire life. Harry could do things with his tongue that only gods could know. He was flexible as *fuck.* For Merlin's sake, he'd taken up fucking *yoga* in his seventh year to work on his flexibility. Harry had sex down to an art.

"No," Harry hissed. "I'm not boring. You're just *bad*."

Zabini was shocked into silence. "Wha—"

"You think that because you toss your money around and your foppish hair that...*no*. You know what, fuck this," Harry scoffed, shaking his head. "You're an arse, you're pushy, you're intrusive, you're a bigger *snob* than Draco Malfoy, and you're a *shitty* bed partner. Your dick barely makes an impact on my pleasure. I've had to go jerk myself off in the bathroom after you've fucked me, *every time*. And I know I'm not crazy, Zabini. I know I'm not."

Harry was pretty sure he sounded a little crazy.

"I didn't—"

"Did I say I was finished?" Harry snarled, standing to his feet. The other patrons were watching, but Zabini seemed too frozen to even think of casting up privacy wards. Harry wasn't going to do him the courtesy. "You arrogant worm of a *boy*. I've had good sex. *Fantastic* sex. I am blown the minds of *many* a-men. But, *you*. You were the *worst*. I pity the

poor fool you fuck next. I hope they know they can expect three pumps and then a shitty partner who passes out right after without even *checking* if his partner came. God."

Harry grabbed his sandwich in a fist and threw it in Zabini's face. Mayo and assorted deli meats exploded all over his *fancy* robes. Harry grinned, fiercely satisfied as Zabini's jaw dropped and he looked ready to cry. He made to storm away. Then, Harry stopped.

"And I fucked Tom at the fundraiser. Because you're the worst."

DIAGNOSIS

"Good morning, Romilda."

"Fuck you." Those were Romilda Vane's two favorite words, Draco was realizing. When fluttering her eyelashes hadn't worked or big, dripping tears, she'd resorted to outright aggression. Draco thought that might be the real her. He preferred it over her manufactured charm.

"I am glad to hear you are doing well," Draco said briskly. "You have been here for about a week now. How has your physical therapy progressed?"

"Shouldn't you know this from my file?" Romilda snarled.

Draco hummed. "But, I would prefer to hear it from you," Draco returned.

Romilda snorted. She crossed her thin, tiny arms, brittle like the bones of an old woman.

"Where are you from?"

"London. Then, Paris. And London, again," Draco said sharply. He leaned forward in his seat, looking at Romilda carefully. She looked just as dreadful as when she'd been admitted in the first place. "Are we going to trade a question for a question?"

"No, that's stupid," Romilda said shortly. "I can barely lift my arms, I'm never hungry, I have trouble breathing, I can't walk, and I'm always cold."

"Well, that's what happens when you have an eating disorder and your body is ruined by mod potions," Draco said. He was careful to keep any accusation out of his voice. He smiled slowly at Romilda as she glowered at him in distaste. "You don't want to talk about this, do you?"

"No," Romilda snapped. "Where's my wand?"

"When you're an at-risk patient, you're not allowed a wand. Furthermore, you are not yet of age. You're *definitely* not allowed a wand," Draco demurred. He leaned back in his chair, waiting for her reaction.

It dawned like a crashing wave and when it landed, her gaunt face was drawn into a skull of absolute fury.

“I’m not going to kill myself,” Romilda hissed.

Draco hummed. “Okay. But, I was mostly speaking about the fact that you’re an addict and I won’t be giving you access to something that will aid you in that addiction. To be frank, Romilda, you are so close to dying...I don’t think you realize how close.”

Romilda fell silent, eyes trained on her lap. She pulled her robe even tighter around her skinny hairless arms. She was bundled up from her chin down to the thick wool socks on her feet, but she was still cold. Draco was quiet. Oddly, he was reminded of a time when his mother was this thin and frail, just a few years after she’d left his father. It had happened in private. It was a time when he’d rarely see his mother, only catches glimpses. She’d disappeared on a retreat for six months, and he’d stayed with Blaise, his mother, and his mother’s latest catch. Narcissa had returned, flushed with renewed strength.

He’d never questioned it before. He hadn’t thought to.

Draco should have.

“I don’t want to die,” Romilda said stubbornly. She picked at the wool blanket laid across her lap.

“What do you want, Romilda?” Draco asked gently.

Softly, she whispered, “I want to be beautiful.”

Draco was reminded so much of the porcelain doll his mother had been so many years ago, that he nearly wept. And then, he remembered the terribly strong woman that she was—the teacup brought back together, and it had cracks, but she was whole, all of her own making.

"Physical modifications are okay, Romilda," Draco began. Romilda looked up like a shark that had smelled blood. "They can be considered healthy, even, if it improves the mental wellbeing of the patient. Modifications should be sane and safe and they should be administered by a *licensed*Healer.”

Romilda twitched.

“But—”

“You are very intelligent, Romilda. I have said that. I have no doubt that you were doing perfectly. But, your body is breaking down. An actual Healer would have put a stop to this long ago,” Draco said firmly. He leaned forward. “How did this start?”

Romilda scowled. “My...my nose. I didn’t like my nose. It was weird and hooked and pointy. Like a bird. I made it small and slender, and pretty.”

Draco hummed. He looked at Romilda. Her nose was crooked and caving, ready to become a crevice in her face. Draco wondered what it used to look like. She’d look different after all of

this was over, he thought morbidly. She wouldn't look like the popular girl from the photographs that her parents had practically shoved into his face, pointing and raving about how 'well-adjusted', she seemed, 'how beautiful-wonderful-smart-*gonnabethenEXTEDITORINCHIEFOFTHEPROPHET*' she was. Draco had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

They hadn't stopped saying 'that's not *our* Milly' until they'd seen her in her bed, and she stared back at them with sharp eyes and brittle bared teeth.

"Did someone say that your nose was not...to their standards?" Draco asked.

Romilda pursed her lips.

"No. I just didn't like it. You said it was okay if I wanted to modify my body," Romilda snarled, vicious and angry. "It's my body. I can do whatever I want with it."

"I said that mod spells and potions should be applied by licensed Healers. You must also be of age. It is the law," Draco said firmly.

Romilda scoffed. "The law," she drawled, shaking her head.

"Romilda, you want to live. You must make that decision," Draco said firmly. "But, make it knowing that if you decide to do this, you will become stronger in every sense of the word. It will be hard, of course. Addiction is a disease, no matter the substance. It is a lifelong struggle. And you will likely experience a sense of dysphoria—you will not look like how you want to, but you will look like you. Do you not want to look like you?"

Romilda softened again, even if she was all sharp edges jutting out from the skin and terrible smiles.

"I don't know what I look like," she said, looking away, eyes trained on the wall.

Draco sighed, softly. There was a knock on the door. Romilda sharpened again, eyes darting to the door.

"Is it my parents?" she snapped. "I don't want to see them."

"Your parents will be coming today, but not quite yet," Draco said. He tried to keep the relief out of his voice, but he thought she could see it anyway from the way she smiled at him like she was winning. He stood up, opening the door and Albus danced in, far too jovial for the icy atmosphere. "Romilda, this is Head Healer Albus Dumbledore. He is the Head of St. Mungo's, and the Mind Healing Floor."

"Good morning, my girl. You look delightful this morning," Albus said. Romilda blanched because even she could hear the utter sincerity in Albus' words. "And how is my student treating you?"

"He's obnoxious. He keeps telling me that I can 'Heal' myself," Romilda said with a roll of her eyes. "I don't even know how that's a thing."

Draco scowled. “I’ll get to that,” he snapped. Romilda grinned her shark’s grin.

“I like you better mean,” she decided.

Draco rolled his eyes. “I’m a professional—”

“I don’t want a professional, Malfoy,” Romilda cut him off. She turned to Albus. “What are you doing here?”

She was so *rude*.

“Well, Draco thought you could use a friend. He thought you seemed agitated since you were admitted,” Albus said and with a snap of his fingers, fire blazed through the room and out of it, Fawkes emerged, all crimson and gold and wonder.

Romilda’s jaw unhinged and she stared with awe-filled eyes as the phoenix swirled through the air and settled at the edge of the bed, staring at her with glossy, black eyes.

“A *phoenix*,” she breathed. She looked up at Draco, blinking rapidly. “A *phoenix*, Malfoy?”

“This is Fawkes,” Draco announced. “He’ll be accompanying us on our little journey.”

Fawkes crept forward, crawling across Romilda’s lap. Romilda lifted a trembling hand that steadied the moment she buried it in Fawkes’ feathers. Magically, she seemed to relax under his weight, some of her anxiety and rage draining away to make room for her awe.

“Our journey?” she asked, looking up at Draco with a delicate frown.

Draco smirked. “Your recovery.”

DIAGNOSIS

Neville was on a *roll.*

He scrawled across his notes fast, his soup spoon hanging out of his mouth as he finished transcribing treatment plans. He finished up one of the last potions treatment plans for an older man that had been admitted to Artifact Accidents just last week. He'd been doing unsavory, and quite frankly idiotic, things with a homemade wand that nobody should be doing. Neville leaned back, flipping shut the file and looking at the last two: Budge, Phineas —a potioneer that had imbibed a half-finished potion because he was part of the old school of thought of human *testing,* the idiot—and Vane, Romilda, the mod potions addict that Astoria was treating.

“Neville.”

Neville looked up and smiled. “Astoria,” he said, waving at the seat in front of him.

Astoria sat down, back so straight that it was like she was being held by magic. "I can't stay long," she said. "I would like to have a meeting about Romilda, sometime within the next week. Can you be there?"

Neville nodded, lifting up her file. “I was just getting started on it. Send an owl through and I’ll write down the time. I can’t promise Snape won’t complain. He requested me on his service this week. Sprout is in a strop about,” Neville sighed.

“Luna will keep him in his place,” Astoria said severely. She was always severe, in the best way possible. Neville had found that he really did enjoy Astoria’s presence, and he’d even gone as far as to get lunch with her during some of their off-hours. She was fun to be around and she consistently kept Malfoy in his place, which was always funny.

“How is she doing, by the way?” Neville asked, voice gentler.

Astoria frowned. “Her physical therapy is not progressing. Draco believes it is because she doesn’t want it to progress,” Astoria said.

“And you think he’s right?” Neville asked, unable to keep his skepticism out of his voice.

Astoria’s lips twisted into a dry smile. “Draco is an arse, but he is a competent Healer. He is an even better Mind Healer,” Astoria said firmly.

Neville blinked once, and then slowly nodded. “If you say so. I just...I never pictured him as a Mind Healer. He doesn’t really have a friendly talkative vibe,” Neville said. “Not like Dumbledore.”

“I don’t think Romilda needs friendly or talkative,” Astoria said. “She’s mean, angry, and bitter. She is also very hurt and lonely and has a distorted picture of herself. They are a match made in heaven.”

Neville nodded.

“Are her struggles documented? The physical ones,” Neville said.

“Yes. She can’t keep food down and her muscle mass can barely support her body without assistance,” Astoria sighed, running her fingers through her hair. “And her parents aren’t helping. They’re constantly breathing down my neck about how we’re going to help her, demanding to know everything. If they aren’t shouting at Hannah or I I’m not sure where the line is, you see. She is nearly of age, so she has a certain autonomy. She is also quite intelligent and shrewd. But, they are her parents. They are responsible for her. They should know what is happening to their child, *non*?”

“They should. But, they don’t get to ask so many questions and they don’t get to upset her. Maybe have Malfoy meet with her parents too? To explain the situation,” Neville suggested.

Astoria looked surprised and then nodded. “This is why we need a meeting,” she said with a smile. “I cannot be the only one to come up with solutions. I worry, you see. I think this is a test from Luna, in a way. Like Weasley said.”

He noticed as he got to know her, she let her accent unravel just a bit more. Her accent wasn't as Parisian and proper as Malfoy's. He wasn't sure what it was, but it was all sprawling vowels, deep and guttural, each syllable intensified. It was like dripping molasses. He quite liked it, if he were being honest. It was relaxing, in a strange way.

"And we'll develop a nutrition plan for her. I'll start looking up potions immediately to have something to present at the meeting," Neville promised. He had so much other work, but he'd promise her that if only to stop that anxious, worried expression from spreading across her face.

Astoria looked relieved. She leaned back in her chair, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

"How is your *maman*, Neville?" she asked.

Neville's brow furrowed. "She failed her psychological assessment. I knew that was going to happen. She didn't. Somehow," Neville muttered under his breath.

To say Alice had been angry was...downplaying her reaction.

"Is she upset?" Astoria asked.

"She's stir-crazy. My mum is a woman that is very good at her job. She loves her job. She loves hunting Dark wizards. Not being able to do that upsets her. She's always been that way," Neville sighed.

"A Nundu can't change its spots," Astoria remarked.

Neville nodded. "Exactly. She needs more time," Neville sighed. "Dad and I told her that we think she should have a sabbatical and she nearly lost it."

Astoria nodded, seriously. "And what about you? How are you doing?"

"What about me? I'm fine," Neville said, picking at his sandwich.

"You nearly lost your mother. Have *you* spoken to a Mind Healer?" Astoria retorted.

"Nothing happened to *me*."

"I think a lot happened to you," Astoria scoffed, shaking her head. "You watched her surgery —which, in hindsight, you *shouldn't* have. I think you're right; family members should speak to a Mind Healer, just as much as the patient. Seeing a family member in the hospital is traumatic."

"I'm *fine*," Neville said, just a little more forcefully, refusing to make eye contact with Astoria. He felt his cheeks heat up with his rising anxiety, and he heard Astoria let out a deflated sigh.

"Okay, Neville. You would tell me if you weren't, yes? Or Hannah?" Astoria asked earnestly. "Or even Weasley?"

“Yes,” Neville said. He wasn’t sure if he was lying or not.

“*D’accord*,” Astoria said with a nod. She stood up and leaned forward, squeezing Neville’s shoulder. “I owl you, *oui*?”

“*Oui*.”

Astoria grinned, honest to Merlin. It was a terrifying grin like she'd been taught to smile too late in life, but it was sincere. Neville snorted.

“Your accent is horrible,” she said before departing, stopping to nod at the two that were descending upon the table with trays themselves.

“What was that about?” Hermione asked.

“A patient. Romilda Vane,” Neville said.

Ron hummed in recognition. “Oh. Right. The addict. How is she doing?”

“Terribly,” Nevill said, voice flat.

Hermione straightened with interest. “Addict? Is this the girl that’s addicted to mod potions?”

“Yes. She can’t keep anything down, so she can’t build her strength. Malfoy is her Mind Healer. We’re going to develop a nutrition plan sometime this week,” Neville said, sounding cautiously optimistic. He wasn’t well-versed in nutrition, but he *could* be if he didn't sleep for the next 36 hours. That sounded like a good enough trade-off for a young teenager's survival. Maybe Sprout knew a little more. He'd ask for a consult.

“Well, I wish you the best of luck,” Hermione said cheerfully.

Neville frowned. Hermione was cheerful. She was never cheerful unless she’d either succeeded at something, triumphing over others, so that she’d have the opportunity to brag *or*...

“Ugh, did you two just have sex?” Neville demanded.

Ron’s ears burned red. “Um...why would you ask that?” Ron asked.

"That's a yes," Neville said, cheeks turning pink. He shook his head, pinching his nose. "Didn't you two have any work to do?"

“We just started our shift!” Hermione protested. “And there’s nothing wrong with sex, Neville. Sexual activity is healthy when it’s between consenting—”

“I got it, Hermione,” Neville said. He was blushing even brighter. “I *did* teach sexual education to over two hundred students.”

“And cheers to you for that. I don’t think I could’ve managed,” Ron saluted.

Neville didn’t say how he nearly didn’t.

“So, I’ve been thinking. We should—” Hermione started.

Before she could finish, an aura of dark and twisty descended upon the table, all imbibing an average-height young trainee who looked far too pissed for how cheerfully green his robes were.

Harry Potter looked ready to commit murder.

“What’s wrong with you?” Neville asked, wide-eyed.

“I just got *dumped*,” Harry hissed, slamming his tray down hard on the lunch table. Ron jumped, eyes wide as he looked over at Hermione and Neville. Harry didn’t even touch his sandwich, savagely consuming his chips instead. “How *dare* he dump me?”

“Zabini dumped you?” Neville breathed.

"Yeah because I'm ‘boring' in bed. Do you want to know how many times someone has told me that before Zabini? *Zero*,” Harry snarled, brimming with fury. “Do you *know* how many people I’ve slept with? I am *amazing*. I bring *tears* to men’s eyes. Blaise Zabini, on the other hand, literally fucked me to sleep. I fell asleep because I was so fucking *bored*. He’s *terrible*.”

Hermione’s mouth had dropped open, and Ron was startled into obnoxious laughter. As the table filled with nervous laughter, Harry continued to tremble, absolutely full of rage.

“Are you sure that he—” Hermione began.

Harry hissed, “I am *sure.*I am the *best*.”

“Merlin’s saggy balls, Harry. It’s not a competition,” Ron laughed.

Harry shook his head. “You just don’t understand my prowess. He wouldn’t be laughing if he knew that I fucked—” Harry began and then he cut himself off, nostrils flaring. The others at the table stared at him, wide-eyed.

“Harry...what did you do?” Neville whispered, leaning forward.

“He fucked Riddle at the fundraiser,” Hermione said with a wicked smirk.

Harry winced. “Hermione!”

“You *knew* and didn’t tell me this?” Ron demanded. “I thought we were in love!”

“Does that mean I suddenly don’t keep secrets?” Hermione said with a grin. “I love you, Ron, really, but it’s *Harry.* He’s my person.”

Neville hummed. “I think secrets are good, sometimes. Your partner shouldn’t know everything about you. Hannah doesn’t need to know that I like to read Spella Weekly when I’m on the toilet.”

“Do you really?” Ron asked, interested. “Did you see last month’s—”

“Don’t let Hannah hear that. Hannah thinks she needs to know your bathing schedule,” Harry teased, fighting against the smile that was slowly crossing his face. Neville flashed a grin at Harry, and Harry sighed. Life would’ve been so much easier if he could just like the nice guy.

And yet, Harry had never liked nice guys, and he’d *always* had shit choice in men. Clearly.

“So, you got dumped,” Neville said, reaching out to steal a chip.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Maybe Neville wasn’t *so* nice, after all.

“Are you one of those people that have never been the person that was broken up with?” Ron asked, already sounding bored by the whole affair. “My sister is like that. Ginny. She’s a stud. Or whatever.”

“A stud?” Neville asked.

“Yeah. She’s very popular with the entire school. Last I heard, she was writing to your sister, Harry,” Ron said with a nod. “But, she’s probably moved on.”

“Oh, she hasn’t,” Harry sang. Ron sat up in surprise. “They’ve *regularly* been exchanging owls, and I think they’re of the...dirty kind. Lav told me that Dad and Sirius were being nosy after a few drinks, and tried to read them, but were hit with a horrible Bat-Bogey Hex.”

“Yeah, that’s Ginny,” Ron said, torn between disgust and how impressed he was that his little sister had gotten the jump on two Aurors, no matter how drunk they were. “I guess...she’s really into Lavender, isn’t she?”

“And she should be. Lavender is great,” Harry declared with a tiny smile.

“You’re smiling again,” Neville noted. “Guess it’s not that bad that you got dumped.”

Harry stopped smiling.

Neville smiled back at him, sunnily.

“You’re a little goblin, you know that, Neville?” Harry asked snippily.

“You shouldn’t use goblin as an insult!” Hermione declared. “There is nothing wrong with being a goblin. They are a complex society of beings with higher thought that are being subjugated under the Ministry’s—”

“I *really* don't need another History of Magic lesson, love. I barely passed the first time," Ron said, leaning over to press a kiss to Hermione's cheek. Hermione stiffened under the affection, a smile crossing her face. She squirmed and turned to give him a quick peck.

“I prefer to be called a ‘troll’ actually,” Neville said, hastily buttering his roll of bread.

Harry let his head fall to the table with a loud thump. “I can’t believe I was *dumped*.”

DIAGNOSIS

“What’s got you in a mood?” Tom asked as he watched Harry stomp about the room like a toddler in a strop.

“For your information, I was *dumped* today.”

Tom’s eyes widened. “Zabini dumped you?”

Harry's nostrils flared and he threw himself into the couch, scowling across the room at the large board, filled with notes and at its center, a half-arsed sketch of the new organism that they had seen in Cedric's chest after a quick internal examination. They hadn't cracked his chest, choosing to stare through the gaps in his ribcage, but it was a...*strange* thing. Cor Cordis indeed. It was still and strangely shaped with a narrow center, its mouth all centered and closed. At least it no longer ravaged the surrounding flesh, but it was an unknown.

Harry didn't like unknowns.

“Did I not just say that?”

“Why?”

Because fucking you ruined me for every other man.

“He said I was bad in bed,” Harry muttered under his breath. He kept his gaze trained on his board, and so, he missed Tom’s face contorting with amusement. He did not miss the man’s snort. Harry’s head snapped to the side and he glared. “What was that?”

“I can assure you, love, that you are, in fact, *not* bad in bed,” Tom said with a smile that could only be really described as a leer. Harry looked away, fighting the smile that was threatening to cross his face. “You are very, very good.”

Harry flushed. “Shut up, Tom.”

“You don’t want me to tell you about how hot the little noises you make are, sweetheart?” Tom teased, sliding smoothly onto the couch next to Harry. He leaned in and Harry hummed, slowly tilting into the heat of his side. “Or how *good* you feel—”

“Tom…” Harry warned. He was fighting a losing battle, trying not to smile. “Shut up.”

“Why? I’m not doing anything wrong,” Tom said, all false innocence and wide eyes. Slowly, he sat back, smug, as if he had achieved something.

Harry absently realized that he was no longer angry.

“Mhmm,” Harry said with a little smirk. “I’m the best you’ve ever had, aren’t I?”

And too sincere, Tom said, softly, “Yes.”

Harry felt his lungs tighten.

“Tom, what did I say—”

“Sweetheart, I need a favor from you.”

Slowly, Harry turned to look at Tom. Really look at him. His expression was still and controlled, as it always was. Harry hated Tom’s superhuman control. But, his eyes were wild, the burgundy burning nearly red, and for a moment, Tom looked terrified.

“What?”

“I need you...to be patient with me,” Tom said quietly.

Harry straightened, raising a single eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yes. You are very open. With yourself. Your mind,” Tom said. And then, slyly, he added, “Your legs.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “Oh fuck off.”

“Be patient with me,” Tom said quietly.

“What did I say, Tom?” Harry asked, his voice soft. “I’m not going to wait forever. And I want to be great. And you’re just...fucked up.”

“We used to be fucked up together.”

“Yes,” Harry allowed. He sighed, letting out a noisy breath. This was far from the conversation that he thought he’d be having after stomping into Tom’s office. “How about this? We live life. We come to work, we do our jobs, we talk like we do. And if I have a date with someone that I like, I’ll go. And if I want to have sex with someone, I will. And you’re free to do the same. But...I won’t say it again. You say the words when you’re ready, and we’ll go from there.”

Tom let out a slow breath, utterly calm again. Any sense of terror that might have lurked in his eyes were gone.

“Yes,” he said.

Harry bit his lip and looked away because Tom saying yes, meant...well, it meant that he *would* say it, one day.

“Okay. Good,” Harry said, pleased. He leaned back in the sofa, and stared at the board again. He couldn’t hide his satisfaction. “Now, Cedric Diggory.”

“Cedric Diggory. The treatment is going nicely. I suppose,” Tom said grudgingly. “The heart is shifting in his chest.”

“We knew that would happen. Transformation magic, and all that,” Harry reminded him. He sighed, shaking his head. “That heart is temperamental and we don’t know what’s going to happen with it. You know, Muggles transfer organs. Transplants.”

Tom snorted. “I’m aware. But, their systems are less complex.”

“How so?” Harry asked.

“Muggles simply must match biologically, and even if they do, the chance of rejection is 10%. In those with magical blood, raise that chance to nearly 100%,” Tom said dismissively.

“But *why*?” Harry demanded. “If there’s even a tiny chance—”

“Once a wizard dies, the magic lingers in the tissue, that’s true. But, it goes dormant and once the body begins to decompose, it escapes with all of the other gases that the human body possesses. Theoretically, magical organ transplants would only theoretically work with magical organs, and they’re only magical if transferred from a warm body to another warm body,” Tom listed out. He turned to Harry, a surprisingly gentle expression on his face. “It’s a fantastic idea, but it wouldn’t work.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Well...what about an electrical shock? The spell that mediwizards use to restart a wizard’s heart. They recover from that,” Harry pointed out.

“Because they haven’t gone through the trauma of having been actually *dead*. Cardiac arrest isn’t the same as death, Harry. You know that. And magic lingers. I said that. But, open up the body and…the magic is gone. No better than a Squib, and that’s if the magic doesn’t recognize the organ as a foreign entity,” Tom waved his hand, dismissing the entire idea. “It’s an interesting concept but unless you can think of ways to make it a viable idea, there are other avenues to pursue.”

“I’m just saying...Frankenstein did it. Frankenstein’s monster was restarted by lightning,” Harry said stubbornly. He cracked a smile at his little joke.

But, Tom paused, staring at him for a long time.

“The Muggle literary character?” he asked slowly.

“Yeah. Um...why?”

Tom stood up suddenly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do you know what Frankenstein’s monster is modeled after?” Tom asked, looking at Harry with wild eyes. He didn’t wait for him to answer. “It’s a *homunculus*. It’s *alchemy*.”

“A what?”

Tom continued as if he hadn’t heard him. “Your idea of electricity to restart the heart is viable. A transplant could be done, but it’ll make him a Squib. But, a Squib is better than failing *again* or rather, failing completely,” Tom said firmly.

Harry frowned at the idea that being a Squib was something that was just slightly better than failing. Tom was already briskly walking out of the room.

“I have to do research. Pen a letter to Nott asking for a preserved body. With organs that are still viable. Maybe someone in a *coma*,” Tom called behind him.

Harry was still sitting on the sofa. He frowned.

“What’s a homunculus?”

DIAGNOSIS

“Two weeks a free man. How does it feel, Blaise?” Draco drawled as he picked as his expertly grilled steak. Blaise snorted in amusement, looking up from is posh salad and salmon, cutting delicately from the slab of pink meat.

“I was always a free man, my friend,” Blaise said with a raised eyebrow.

Theodore squirmed. “I don’t feel comfortable talking about Harry like this…”

“Oh, relax, Theo. He cannot hear you,” Draco sniped, rolling his eyes.

It was times like these that he was pleased that he'd attended Beauxbatons with Astoria as opposed to going to Hogwarts with their nervous friend, Theo. Theo was supposed to be an Unspeakable, but he was constantly looking around as if he were on the danger of being assassinated.

Actually...him being an Unspeakable might be *exactly* why he constantly looked around with the expectation of assassination.

But, really, that was Theo’s fault. No one had told him to become an Unspeakable.

Except...for Draco. And Blaise. And Daphne and Astoria.

“He is quite fearsome. He took it hard, when I broke up with him,” Blaise said, pitying Harry. Draco’s brow furrowed. Blaise was practically preening from the idea that he had broken Harry Potter’s heart, and really, no one should be taking so much pleasure in Harry Potter’s discomfort except for Draco.

Draco was his rival. Only *he* could attack Harry’s character and emotional well-being.

“He’s in love with Riddle, you know. His teacher,” Draco said firmly.

Blaise's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed like he could see what Draco was doing. Draco stared back at him and smugly ate a piece of his steak. He resisted the urge to wince—the steak was too dry. Bugger.

“Is he really?” Theo squawked. “I thought he said they were ex-boyfriends. Harry doesn’t usually take that long—”

“You knew?” Blaise snapped.

Draco grinned, gleeful. “You *didn’t*?”

"I had my...suspicions," Blaise allowed. He waved his hand as if dismissing the very thought, but Draco had known Blaise for over ten years. He could see that the man was seething. "No matter. Harry was fun, while it lasted, I suppose."

“He’s insane,” Draco corrected.

He was also brilliant and would probably revolutionize Healing, but that wasn’t something Draco felt comfortable admitting out loud.

“I like pretty things,” Blaise returned, sharply.

There was a long time of uncomfortable silence. Theo and Draco looked at one another and then looked down at their food.

“Don’t look like that,” Blaise snapped. “You said you hated him Draco.”

“I mean...yeah,” Draco said grudgingly.

Everyone at the table knew that was code for ‘*I’m terribly jealous of him*’.
“He was boring!” Blaise protested.

Theo snorted. “Harry Potter is anything but—”

A hand slammed down on the table. Theo squeaked himself into silence. All three men looked up and Draco thought he felt his blood curdle.

Harry Potter had the exact same glare as his scary mother.

“Are you talking about me?” Harry barked. Before Blaise could say anything, Harry continued. “Because I was raised by two Aurors, a werewolf, and the baddest bitch in this hospital, and I won’t *hesitate* to sick them on you.”

Draco looked bored. “You’ve fucked ⅔ of this table,” he noted absently.

“ ‘Fucked’ is a strong word for what Zabini and I did,” Harry said, lips twisted into something sour. He turned, very clearly putting his back to Blaise, and staring down at Theo. “I need a body, Theo.”

Theo choked on his tea. “Excuse me?” he sputtered, mopping up the spilled tea with a napkin. Draco sneered.

“*Tergeo*,” the Malfoy sighed, siphoning up the excess tea.

“I need a comatose body,” Harry said firmly. “You’ve been dodging my owls.”

“I just haven’t *seen* them,” Theo insisted. “I am a very important person in my Department, and I don’t only have—”

He stopped firmly in his tracks, clutching at his mouth. He substituted his words with a glare, but Harry stared back at him, utterly unimpressed. Blaise and Draco exchanged looks of amusement, and Harry crossed his arms over his chest, tapping his foot.

“Read my letters, Theo. Get me my body or there will be *dire* consequences," Harry warned. He turned on his heel without another word, stalking away. His silence towards Blaise and Draco was evidence enough of his dismissal.

Draco snorted. “You both fucked him.”

DIAGNOSIS

"Lily, what are we doing here?" Severus hissed impatiently, stalking Lily like an overgrown bat. Lily hummed, a stone-like frown on her face as she scanned the area. "Why can't we eat in my office?"

“Because I’m not here to have lunch with you,” Lily said, voice dry. She finally caught sight of what she was looking for. She smiled when she saw her son terrorizing Zabini, an unknown man, and Draco, his hands on his hip and rage contorting his face.

Her son was *perfection*.

“What do you mean—”

“I’m having lunch with my son. Go away, Severus,” Lily said. She looked at Severus’ offended expression and gave a wry smile. “Apparate away.”

Severus swooped away like an overgrown bat, probably to skulk in the back of the cafeteria like a stalker. Lily sighed and went to sit at a table, waiting patiently as Harry finished verbally eviscerating the three men that had most probably been gossiping. That had always been a problem Lily had had with Draco. He was an insufferable gossip. Harry cleared his throat and stepped back, looking around.

Lily lifted her hand in greeting, and through a series of strange, uncomfortable hand gestures, Harry smiled and proceeded to grab food for the both of them. Lily scowled when Severus double-backed and spoke to Harry. Harry’s expression contorted into something like rage. He brushed past Snape, who looked far too smug and deserving of a hex, and grabbed an enormous salad and basket of chips before he went to join Lily.

“Fuck Snape,” Harry snarled.

Lily snorted. “What did Severus do now?”

“Asked me what it was like to be such a great disappointment in comparison to my brilliant mother or some rot. Fuck him,” Harry hissed.

Lily’s eyes narrowed at Severus. Severus jumped when he realized that he was in line with her glare, billowing out of the cafeteria without another thought.

“Ignore him. He’s irrelevant,” Lily said dismissively. She took the salad, pleased with Harry’s choice. He’d even remembered not to get her one with raisins.

“Mum, he’s an arsehole. Why are you even still friends with him?” Harry snarled, roughly handling his chips. Lily pursed her lips, staring down at his lunch with a look brimming with parental disapproval.

“When was the last time you ate something that wasn’t fried or takeaway?” Lily asked.

When I went to dinner with Tom three weeks ago.

“Does it matter?” Harry snapped.

Lily huffed. “I would like you and your friends over for dinner some time. You should have a home-cooked meal.”

“Merlin, Mum. You sound like Mrs. Weasley. Every time Ron firecalls his mum, she howls through the fireplace about how *peaky* we look,” Harry said with a grin, shaking his head. He paused. “You didn’t answer my question, though.”

Lily nodded, looking far too serene.

“I know. I was thinking about it,” Lily said.

“You have to think about it?” Harry asked with a frown.

Lily nodded. “Why are you friends with Hermione Granger?”

“I mean, she can be an arse and a know-it-all, and she annoyed the *hell* out of me when we first met, but she’s brilliant. She gets me. She’s my person,” Harry said patiently. He leaned forward, eyes fixed on his mother’s, and again, he was struck by how green her eyes were. Did everyone think the same when they looked at him?

“He was my person too, once.”

“Once?”

Lily let out a bitter laugh. “He’s pretty pathetic, now, isn’t he?” she asked. “I know what everyone says about him. But...we were friends before Hogwarts and then, through Hogwarts. And he followed me to the St. Mungo’s program. He was the only person that would partner with me during our skills lab. If we weren’t on the same team, I worked alone.”

“What? Why? You’re brilliant!” Harry snapped, shaking his head.

“Yes. But, everyone else thought that having a woman on their team would be bad luck.”

Harry was dumbstruck into silence. Lily looked warmer than she had in years, all of those layers of cold frigidity peeling back as the years did.

“He hates me and Dad,” Harry said carefully.

Lily sniffed. “No. Harry-love, I’m pretty sure he hates me.”

“Mum, he’s, like, in love with you,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh, but he *hates* me, Harry,” Lily said. She spoke of the idea of her oldest friend hating her like she was speaking of the weather. It didn’t seem to bother her at all. “He hates that it used to be the two of us against the world, and now, it’s not. He hates that he used to be...my *person* until I found James, who is my *soul*.”

Harry flinched. It sounded terrifying. Losing Hermione was a terrifying thought. Except, if she was happy—as was now, with Ron, who looked at her like she’d spun the stars into the sky and hung the moon and the sun—he was happy. He couldn’t help but smile when they bickered or when they made up with sweet murmurs of ‘I love you’ and swift, merciless kisses that held the utmost affection. It made him feel warm, and though he was jealous, sometimes, of how Hermione had her shit together, he could *never* be jealous enough to punish her for it, because he loved both of them so much that he could no longer imagine his life without them.

“That’s...I feel a little sorry for him, I think,” Harry said quietly. “He’s still an arse, though.”

Lily snorted. “He is. He thinks that you’re holding me back. You think he’s cruel, now? The things he says about you and your father to me,” Lily said with a smirk. “He thinks that you’re holding me back. I think you push me forward. When I’m ready to come back, you’ll be so far ahead of me...it’ll only make me want to push even harder.”

“Should you really be looking forward to the competition that I’ll give you?” Harry said, grinning back at her.

“Why not? I would never resent you for it,” Lily said firmly. “Even if Severus does. His opinion doesn’t matter to me. Sometimes...he doesn’t matter to me. He used to. Severus used to mean something to me. He was my best friend, all that I had. And then he became...this bitter version of himself. And while I grew as a person...while I’m *still* growing, he’s not. I can’t do anything about that. It’s not on me to do anything about that.”

Harry swallowed hard as he listened to Lily’s words. She was watching him with those green eyes. *His* green eyes. She looked like she was mourning something or maybe someone, but then she shifted and she put away that grief in favor of that dry look that Harry now recognized as a weird smile.

“Tell me about alchemy,” Harry said instead.

Lily jerked, eyes widening in surprise at his words “What do you want to know?”

“What does turning stuff into gold have to do with Healing?” Harry asked sheepishly.

“I’m a medical alchemist. Your mother is a medical alchemist. You don’t know what medical alchemy is?” Lily demanded.

“To be fair, I didn’t want anything to do with you until a few months ago,” Harry admitted. “I also don’t really know much about the Evans method.”

Lily groaned. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “The Evans method involves using alkahest to break down a substance to see what it’s made out of. The alkahest breaks down compound spell damage into their previous components and allows us to treat each separately. They’ll tell you that it’s revolutionary, but, really, it only works for compound spell damage, and you need to know how to treat each spell.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “How did you figure that out?”

Lily shrugged, looking at her salad steadily.

“I don’t know. Spells aren’t as complicated as people think they are. They all have ingredients, just like potions. The alkahest is used to dissolve potions,” Lily said calmly.

Harry was struck again. His mother *was* brilliant, no matter how much he’d denied it when he was younger. That couldn’t be overlooked any longer.

“Okay,” he muttered to himself. “So, you can pull things apart. But, isn’t alchemy about creating something from nothing—”

“No,” Lily interrupted, voice sharp. “That’s impossible. You can’t *create* matter, in the basest sense. Everything is a formula. A recipe. It just sounds mystical because I am capable of transforming things beyond what a wand can.”

“Like a homunculus?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lily hummed, nodding as she began to eat her salad, losing herself in her passion.

“Like a homunculus.”

“What *is* a homunculus?” Harry asked.

Lily’s eyes narrowed. “You really didn’t take alchemy, did you?”

“To be honest, Mum, I don’t even think I’ve read a single one of your papers in full. That’s how little I liked you,” Harry said with a dry smile.

Lily’s eagle-eyed gaze softened with vulnerability and she gave a weak smile. “And now?” she asked quietly.

“I’m liking you more. I know you more. You’re kinda weird, Mum,” Harry snorted. “No social skills. How did you end up with someone like Dad?”

“I knew Remus, and your Dad thought I was hot. And then, when he found out that I can’t hold a conversation without talking about Golpalott’s Third law, he somehow found that...*charming*,” Lily said with no amount of disdain. “And I thought he was an idiot. Until I realized that raw intelligence doesn’t mean anything without compassion and empathy. You have the best parts of us.”

Harry’s cheeks burned. He averted his gaze. “Thanks, Mum,” he mumbled.

Lily straightened up, sharply, and she shook herself, her intellectual armor sliding over her once more.

“It’s...it’s a humanoid being,” Lily said slowly. “Look, alchemy is about balance and reinvention and creation. Some people tried to take it too far. Some people thought that if you could turn metals into gold or deconstruct spellwork, one could create life.”

“Create *life*?” Harry blurted out. “So, necromancy? Is alchemy connected to necromancy?”

Lily shook her head. “Necromancy is about resurrecting someone that is dead. That is against every part of nature. That is...grotesque,” Lily said firmly. “That is the antithesis of Healing.”

“Is it?” Harry argued though he agreed. “We’re meant to save lives. Isn’t that saving a life?”

“At what cost?” Lily retorted. “Don’t we have a duty to let our patients die with dignity? Why prolong their pain and suffering?”

There was that word again: *dignity*.

"Yes," Harry said firmly. Lily blinked, surprised by his immediate acquiescence to her point. She nodded when she realized he'd only been playing devil's advocate. "So, if it's not necromancy, what is it?"

“It’s a dead end. It’s the creation of a husk that is animated to imitate life, but it doesn’t have a *soul*,” Lily pressed on. “It’s barbaric, by the way. Requires animal experimentation and sacrifices. Homunculi are unnecessary evils.”

“But, what’s inside? Is it a humanoid body, with the organs to match?” Harry asked. “Does it speak? What does it do?”

Lily shook her head. “It’s a husk. It doesn’t speak. It doesn’t need nourishment except for magic. They have strange powers, but it isn’t worth it. You’re talking about reanimation. Frankenstein stuff. Like Inferi. But, what are you thinking, Harry? Thinking of switching specialties?”

Harry grabbed a chip and smirked. He popped it in his mouth

“Not on your life.”

“Don’t speak with your mouth full,” Lily warned.

Harry scowled. “*Mum*.”

DIAGNOSIS

"When are you two doing that photoshoot thing?" Ron asked, lying across Emmeline's couch, spinning his wand in tiny sparkles. He looked perfectly satisfied with showering himself with different colored sparks as Hermione and Emmeline poured over the department case files.

“Don’t know. We’re still in talks,” Hermione muttered. She looked up from the files, frowning. “Emmeline, does there seem to be...a *massive* influx of patients to the floor?”

"Yes. But, I haven't heard anything from the Prophet. A lot of transfer files here," Emmeline said, waving lazily at the pile down on the floor. She frowned, leaning back in her chair, arms folded across her chest. "There's so much to do. They don't tell you that when they offer you your own floor. They tell you ‘oh, the pay raise, the control, the *opportunities*’. They don’t tell you about all the damn *paperwork*.”

She said it like she’d say the word ‘shit’, nose wrinkling.

“What was it like? To be a department head at a young age?” Hermione asked.

“Disconcerting. I’m turning 30 next month—”

“You’re turning *30*?” Ron asked.

Emmeline’s eyes narrowed. “Problem, Ron?”

“Uh, no. You just don’t look like you’re 30,” Ron said with a nervous laugh.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

“That’s because I’m *not* 30. I’m 29,” Emmeline snapped. Her gaze softened when she turned back to Hermione. “I became department head about a month before my 28th birthday. My former superior was nearly on death’s door. He was 112, and *senile*.”

“How so?”

“He thought magical creatures were heinous beasts that needed to be locked up. Werewolves and vampires were monsters instead of *people*. Maybe not human, but they *are* people,” Emmeline said with conviction.

“Have you always felt this way about creatures? So passionate?” Hermione asked. “I thought...when I first started, I thought I was going to be in Spell Damage.”

“Everyone thinks they’re going to be in Spell Damage,” Emmeline snorted. She tossed her head, not unlike a horse. “Few ever are. But, yes, I was always passionate about magical creatures. I got an O in Care for both my OWLs and NEWTs. I nearly went into the Ministry, but bureaucracy is hell, and people are bigots.”

Hermione’s lips curled up into a smirk. “Agreed.”

“Anyway, it was an adjustment. Every month, the heads of the departments have a budget meeting with Dumbledore and, for some reason, McGonagall. Luna and I are the youngest, and though we’re not the only women, we’re the only young women. Sprout is fine, but she’s of the old guard. There are a lot of egos in that room. Riddle and Snape are...*obnoxious*,” Emmeline said with a roll of her eyes.

Ron barked out a laugh. “Riddle is a bastard and Snape is the *worst*.”

“And I’m in that room because Dumbledore gives far too much leeway with a budget that we don’t always have.”

The three younger Healers jumped when they finally noticed the older woman waiting in the doorway of Emmeline’s office, her wand held aloft.

"Oh, Minerva, how can I help you?" Emmeline asked. She sounded nervous as if she still wasn't sure if it was appropriate to call Healer McGonagall by her first name.

Hermione didn’t think she’d ever get to that level.

“I was looking for...Weasley, don’t you have work to be doing?” McGonagall demanded.

Ron nearly fell off the couch, attempting to get to his feet as fast as possible. McGonagall stared at him, utterly unimpressed. Ron rubbed the back of his neck, awkwardly.

“Uh...Mediwizard Black told me to...go away?” Ron said. “She made me fold linens. *Again*. And the E&T is suspiciously quiet today. She said if I stayed out her way for the day, she’d let me come with her to a Holyhead Harpies game. They’re playing the Chudley Cannons, and they asked for her to—*nevermind*. That’s unimportant”

“And you didn’t think it prudent to *ask* if any of your superiors needed assistance? Very well,” McGonagall continued as Ron began to sputter. She looked around at the messy office, her nose wrinkling. Ron could see why. It looked like a hurricane had made everything in the room explode. Ron had it on good authority that that was what it normally looked like.

Emmeline wasn’t the neatest of people, no matter her immaculate appearance.

“How can I help you, Healer McGonagall?” Ron squeaked with a bow.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Ron nearly groaned: why had he *bowed?*

If it was possible, McGonagall looked even *less* impressed by him. “You could tell me where Mediwizard Black is,” McGonagall said firmly. “There is a patient that she and Rodolphus

Lestrange brought in last night. His charts are incomplete, and before I proceed with the internal procedure to correct the damage, I'd like to know what was done to him."

Ron straightened, intrigued. "Is this the guy with the Vengeance Curse?"

"Yes, it is that 'guy'," McGonagall drawled in that Scottish brogue.

Ron grinned.

"Vengeance Curse?" Hermione asked, temporarily distracted.

"Yeah. Bellatrix said that he tried to cast it on some Muggle that we being an arse and moving his garbage into his trash can. It backfired because that's not a good reason to use that curse," Ron said, amused even as Hermione looked at him, utterly horrified. "Why is it an internal procedure?"

"Do you not see anything wrong with a wizard potentially using his magic on a Muggle for something as petty as that?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, nothing happened to him, and I'm sure he'll be slapped with a hefty fine," Ron said with a shrug.

"He's spitting up slugs. He has been for two weeks," McGonagall said, sounding amused.

"Wicked," Ron breathed. "She probably gave him something salt-based, though."

McGonagall leaned back, surprised. "How do you come to that conclusion?"

"Slugs dry out when met with salt, right? He wouldn't have been getting proper nutrition, or the slugs could have been obstructing his breathing. Salt would temporarily stop the cycle. How are his kidneys?" Ron asked.

McGonagall finally—*finally*—looked impressed.

"Weasley, you're with me," McGonagall barked. "Let's give you something productive to do."

Ron practically vibrated with excitement. He lifted his hand to the two women. "Later," he said, intent on bolting from the room and getting to the theatre as fast as possible.

"Minerva, before you go, maybe you can make sense of this—" Emmeline started, earnestly.

McGonagall pursed her lips. "I doubt it. I am a Spell Damage specialist," McGonagall returned. "Furthermore, I've come for Weasley's assistance. I'm on a bit of a schedule if you will. This means that my patient is currently, open, in a magical theatre."

Emmeline sighed, already exasperated.

"It's not about a case. It's about all of this paperwork. There seems to be an influx. Have you heard of anything? Creature attacks?" Emmeline asked. She sighed, running her fingers

through her bouncy curls, mussing it up some.

“When did this...influx begin?” McGonagall asked.

“About four weeks ago,” Hermione said, helpfully.

McGonagall hummed. “And when did you get published?”

“Four weeks...they’re sending them *here*?” Emmeline asked, her eyes widened. She looked over at Ron and Hermione, biting her blood red lips in an attempt to keep her composure. “They’re sending them *here*.”

"You are considered the top of your field, Healer Vance. Of course, they're sending cases here, in hopes that you will apply all of your genius to their own circumstances," McGonagall said. Somehow, it was possible for her to infuse all of the sheer boredom and genuity in the world into her voice. A strange look crossed her face as she watched Emmeline's encroaching panic. "Oh Healer Vance, you are far more like your student than you'd like to admit."

Hermione twitched at her words. She demurely turned away from Ron’s question gaze or Emmeline’s panic, eyes trained on her own paperwork. She knew the lesson well. She wondered then if McGonagall was going to teach.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Emmeline said, voice high with forced whimsy.

“You should trust in your own abilities more,” McGonagall said firmly. She scoffed, shaking her head. “Utterly graceless. There *is* an in-between of the arrogance of Lily Evans and the self-esteem of a flobberworm.”

“Well-deserved arrogance,” Ron interjected.
McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “But, arrogance, nonetheless. Come now, Weasley. I have an open patient, and they don’t need obnoxious distractions,” she said. She ignored Ron’s squeak. “They must deal with the consequences of greatness: an overbearing workload.”

DIAGNOSIS

It had been a month and a half went it all went terribly wrong.

It was a blur of motion, of movement, of blood, and it had begun with the showering of red sparks.

The two Healers had paused in the middle of their work, watching their wands for only a second before spinning into motion. Harry had made it out of the door first, but Tom had reached the room before him, using his superior height to propel himself down the corridor. He slammed the door open with his shoulder, pushing a young matron out of the way to stand at the foot of Cedric’s bed. Harry crashed into the doorframe, face gone white.

“What’s happening to him? What is happening to my son?” Amos Diggory shouted in his panic.

Cedric was still on the bed, arms tossed haphazardly and twisted like he'd collapsed like a marionette doll whose strings had been cut. His blankets were tangled around his legs, a copy of Seeker Weekly sliding off the edge of the bed. His back was arched like a bow, his chest pulled upward by some terrible force.

“We need to cut him open,” Tom said firmly. He waved his wand and turned to the terrified matron, her fingers trembling. “What happened?”

The matron was silent. Harry rushed forward, already casting diagnostics charms.

“Tom, his heart is acting erratically. I don’t...the diagnostics charm doesn’t know what it is!” Harry said, unable to keep the panic out of his voice. Amos lunged forward grabbing onto Cedric’s hand.

“What does that mean?” Amos asked frantically.

Tom’s nearly non-existent patience had ended. “Speak, you daft girl! What happened?”

"H-he just...he just…his eyes rolled back and there was a loud cracking sound like bones snapping. then he collapsed. And then his chest...something started to *pulse*,” the matron stammered, pointing with a trembling finger.

“Damn,” Tom hissed under his breath. “Harry, ready for transport?”

“Ready, Healer.”

“Give Mr. Diggory a Calming Draught and send for Miriam Strout,” Tom commanded the matron. With a wave of his wand, he transfigured the bed into a floating slab and directed it out of the room at a brisk run. Amos’ fingers slipped away from Cedric’s, and he reached for Harry instead just as Harry prepared to run after Tom.

“Mr. Diggory, I have to go,” Harry insisted as patiently as he could. He gritted his teeth and stared at the man in earnest. Amos didn’t let go.

“You save my son,” he commanded like he had the power of God. “You have to save him. He’s all I have, you see. Save my son.”

And Harry from before—Harry before all of the death and the grief and Katie *fucking* Bell—would have told him that he would. He would have made that promise and smiled at Amos, only to be devastated when it all went terribly, terribly wrong. Harry was not the Harry from before.

So, all he said was, “I will do all I can.”

And if he couldn’t, Cedric would die with dignity. *That* was a promise Harry could keep.

Harry left the room at a run to catch up with Tom, catching the man in the stairwell, already a few flights down. He took the stairs at leaps and bounds, staring over at Tom.

“Harry, what did the diagnostics charm say?” Tom barked, eyes trained straight ahead. He had never looked so serious or grim. It didn’t do Harry’s confidence any good.

“Major cardiac event. No specifics. Did we...did we do this?” Harry whispered, breathless from how fast they were moving.

“We won’t know until we open him up,” Tom said as they finally approached the magical theatre floor. They burst into Tom’s usual theatre in seconds.

Miriam Strout was standing there, already waiting, her hands gloved and the instruments hovering on the silver tray.

“Healer Riddle,” she greeted.

"Matron Strout," Tom said. He looked down at Cedric and banished the man's hospital robes. Strout rushed forward, laying out a towel over Cedric's genitals to keep him being on display. At least, more than he was. Tom turned to Harry, expectant. There would be no hand-holding or coddling. Not this time. "Vitals?"

“Erratic? At best?” Harry whispered. He cast the diagnostics charm again. “He’s not breathing right. Should I administer a lightning spell? Restart his heart?”

He knew he sounded frantic at best, but he couldn’t help it. All he could think was: *we were so, so close*.

They had been formulating a new *plan.* It was in the birthing stages, but they had thought that if they bought enough time, they could introduce a better treatment plan to Cedric, one with intent to heal. Except, time had run out.

They had been so close.

“No,” Tom said and then he slashed his wand across Cedric’s chest.

The blood welled at the gash, beady red, and then it spilled outward, slow and sluggish. The long streams of blood looked like life seeping outward. Harry twisted his wand, weaving the spell through the air. Slowly, flesh and muscle pulled outward, revealing the bloody ribcage, splintered and cracked, as if bursting out from the inside. Harry pressed his wand to the ribcage, and when he went to explore, Tom grabbed his wrist and pulled him back just a few yards.

“What?” Harry demanded. “We have to—”

“Look,” Tom whispered quietly.

And Harry did, and his heart broke.

There was something shifting in Cedric's ribcage. That something was pink and pulsing, twisting and jerking against the binds of arteries and bones. It was trying to tears its way outward.

When it finally did, it came out of the opening quite slowly, floating out serenely. It was strangely shaped, narrow at the top with black glossy beads for eyes, and it swelled out towards the bottom, a mass of plump pink muscle. The aorta had shifted and the pulmonary veins waved through the air. The jagged tears beneath the eyes opened like a mouth, revealing a row of sharp, bloody teeth.

And Cedric was so still and pale on the table.

"What is that?" Matron Strout asked softly.

"That is Cor Coris," Tom said, taking a step backward as the Cor Cordis sluggishly moved through the air.

"It's Cedric Diggory's heart."

Harry said it so dispassionately the both Matron Strout and Tom turned to look at him. Harry stared at the heart with a blankness. He could feel nothing but the ice in his veins. There was no grief or sadness. It just was. Cedric was dead, just like all the rest of them.

"Time of death: 6:47 PM," Tom declared.

"Get that thing away," Harry said, striding forward. He waved his wand, batting the Cor Cordis to the side. It floated through the air, lazily, and then began floating towards both Matron Strout and Tom again, as if it were trying to stalk them, but was unable to move any faster.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked even as he Conjured a small metal chest.

"Giving him some dignity. I'm not very good at Conjuring clothing. Do you know how, Matron Strout?" Harry asked quietly. His eyes felt suspiciously dried. He didn't even feel like crying. He thought he should. Harry had wanted to cry about all of the others.

Except, he was tired of crying. He was just...*tired*.

"Yes," Matron Strout said. She took a step forward.

Harry began to work. First, he siphoned the blood away, cleaning Cedric's pale skin. Cedric's eyes were already closed, so he didn't have to do that. Harry wondered absently what the last thing Cedric had seen was; he hoped it was his father, who loved him with every part of him, or maybe something about Quidditch, which had been Cedric's dream. He'd wanted to try out for Puddlemere United after he was Healed.

Cedric was dead.

Then, he began to Heal the muscle and skin, watching the flesh knit together slowly but surely. Cedric had been a good person. He had been one of the few good people Harry had

ever met in his life, he was sure of it. He had been worried about his father, first, even when he had everything else in the world to worry about. Cedric had been young and healthy, and then…

Harry cleared his throat, nodding when he healed the man from belly to sternum, leaving only a thin, silvery line in his wake. Harry stepped back and allowed Strout to dress the man, turning his attention back to Tom. Tom was slowly using magic to manipulate the air around the Cor Cordis, directing it into the chest. Carefully, he pressed the Cor Cordis into the wooden and metal chest and then slammed the top down, locking it with his magic. The chest jerked for a moment as the organism struggled, but another rap from Tom's wand made the entire box still.

"You're not going to kill it?" Harry asked.

Tom blinked once. "We created a brand new organism. I'm obligated to study it, both ethically and legally. The Department of Mysteries will need to look into it."

"Right," Harry muttered. He stared back over his shoulder at Cedric. He was dressed again, in dark robes and he looked so damn young, and Harry felt far older than he thought he should.

"Harry, are you okay?" Tom asked.

"Are you?" Harry retorted.

Tom frowned. "I don't know."

"Neither do I," Harry said quickly. "I want to tell Diggory."

Tom's eyes widened. "Really? Why?"

"He was my friend."

Harry said nothing else, and Tom didn't either. He nodded instead, understanding immediately, and Harry was overwhelmed, for just a moment, with how much he *adored* the man in front of him. It was gone in the next second. Harry strode towards the door and Tom followed him.

They moved in complete silence, foregoing the lift for the long trek up the stairs. When they emerged on the Spell Damage floor, it was quiet.

Cedric's room was quiet.

Amos Diggory was alone.

He looked up as soon as the door had creaked open just a crack, and was on his feet before Harry and Tom had fully entered the room. Harry was so still. He was calmer than he had ever been before. An odd thought crossed his mind.

It had been a beautiful day to conquer death.

Except, they hadn't.

"Where's my son?" Amos asked.

Tom stared at the wall, his expression so carefully blank that he looked like marble. Slowly, he shifted his gaze to Amos and then to Harry. Harry took a deep breath and then stepped forward.

"Today, Cedric suffered an extreme cardiac event," Harry began. He nearly faltered, eyes cutting over to Tom. Tom was watching him. Harry turned back to Amos and took a step forward. "When we were notified, we immediately took action. We took Cedric down to the magical theatre and immediately cracked his chest. When we did so, we saw that the transformative Healing that we have been using to aggressively battle the Hearteater Virus had an adverse effect. The heart had transformed into a sentient organism, independent of Cedric's body. It left the body and attacked us. We subdued the heart. Unfortunately, Cedric Diggory died today. I am sorry for your loss."

Harry finished with all the sincerity he could muster. He looked at Amos, watched him work through Harry's words. He could see the disbelief and the cresting terror that tore at the man's face.

"Where is he?" Amos whispered, voice crackling with the slow-growing grief. "Where's his body?"

Harry swallowed, lifting his chin.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Diggory, the result of the treatment was something that was sentient and independent of his body as an organism. This is unprecedented. Cedric needs to be cleared with the Department of Mysteries. You can see him, but we can't release the body to you—" Harry said, pushing through the words even as they stuck in his throat like glue.

Amos' face contorted with anguish, and Harry saw his composure shatter.

"That's my *son!*" Amos Diggory shouted. "That's my boy! That's my *son!*"

Harry felt his eyes burn.

"I...I...kn—"

"You don't know *anything!*" Amos roared. He collapsed onto the edge of the bed, his face buried in his hands as he let out a noiseless sob, full of such fury and terrible sadness. His shoulders shook with suppressed cries, and Harry reached back.

Tom's hand slipped into his, their fingers laced together and he squeezed.

"Mr. Diggory, I am so, *so* sorry. *We* are so—" Harry said.

And then Amos shot up from the bed, wand out, and he lunged towards Harry. Harry gasped when Tom shoved him behind his taller body, staring down at Amos with irritation, his own wand out.

“And you?” Amos sneered. “Are you sorry?”

“The loss of your son’s life is regrettable. I am sorry for your loss,” Tom said stiffly.

“I will *sue* you. Do you hear me? I will make sure you lose *everything,*” Amos hissed.

“I’m afraid that would be futile. There is no evidence of malpractice. Your son was part of an experimental trial. The experiment failed,” Tom returned just as coldly. Harry flinched at the chilliness in his voice.

“Tom…” he whispered. Tom didn’t look back at him. He still hadn’t let go of his hand.

“Is there a problem?”

Harry turned, looking at Albus Dumbledore with wide eyes. The man looked back at him, all humor drained out of his electric blue eyes, graveness etched into the lines of his face. He looked very old, for the first time that Harry had ever seen him.

“They killed him. They killed my *son!*” Amos rasped. “They killed my son and I don’t even get his *body*.”

Albus sighed quietly. “Oh, Amos, I am so, *so* sorry,” he said. He walked past Tom and Harry, gripping the man tightly by the shoulder and squeezing.

Amos burned brighter than ever before and then he deflated like the old grieving man that he truly was.

Then, he wept.

DIAGNOSIS

Rodolphus didn’t bother knocking.

With very little fanfare, he threw the door open with a simple wave of his wand, cracking through Tom’s lackluster locking charms, and he stood in the doorway. Rodolphus looked.

Tom sat at his desk, a very serious expression on his face as he considered the amber bottle. Rodolphus took another step forward, reading the label: Blishen's Firewhiskey. Tom had always been a connoisseur of liquors, despite how much he stooped to the cheap shit that they had been able to afford when they were trainees. They had been stupid, then, Bellatrix and Rodolphus. They had both had family money and had elected to use only their meager earnings, in some sort of twisted solidarity with Tom. Tom had called them idiots for their sentiment.

“Are you going to drink?” Rodolphus asked.

Tom hummed to himself. “I’m not sure yet,” he said. He sounded far more dazed than he ever had, but his burgundy eyes were sharp, almost to the point of hyperawareness. He lifted his wand. “*Aguamenti. Glacius*.”

Three perfectly formed ice cubes settled at the bottom of the glass tumbler.

“I think you intend to drink,” Rodolphus said. He sat down in the seat across from Tom. “I think it best that you don’t drink alone.”

Rodolphus Summoned a tumbler from Tom’s ill-hidden cabinet. He moved to pour out the whiskey, but Tom’s hand flashed out, wrapping around Rodolphus’. Rodolphus stilled, fingers just wrapped around the narrow bottle.

“My patient died,” Tom said quietly.

Rodolphus’ breath caught in his lungs.

“I thought you said he was getting better.” He tried to say it as gently as he could, but Tom looked up, already on high alert, nostrils flaring.

“He was. And now he’s dead,” Tom snarled, wielding all of his rage in those six words. He didn’t deflate, exactly, but he pulled all of that brimming fury back into himself, letting it settle in the red of his eyes, between the bridge of his nose. He let out a long shuddering breath through his nostrils.

“Maybe we really should get drunk,” Rodolphus said with a sad little smile.

Tom considered it. Rodolphus could see it. And then, it was gone.

Tom stood up so sharply, his chair rocked behind me.

“No,” he whispered. “I’m going to conquer Death.”

And then, he began to work.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is up later than I wanted it to be up, but it is what it is. You’ll still get the next chapter before I go away on vacation. After that, I haven’t yet determined when I can likely make an update, but it probably won’t be until September, as I’ll be back in school and want to get acclimated to my heavy course load and my semester job schedule. Also, I’m moving into a brand new apartment, and my roommates are moving in before me so coordinating all of that is the fucking worst.

Also, if this wasn’t clear, this chapter took place over a number of weeks. I tried to include non-obvious time stamps.

Finally, this ended really fucking sad. BUT, this WILL have a happy ending. I SWEAR. It might not seem like it between this chapter and next chapter, but there will be a happy ending. Bear with me.

EDIT: I hope to have the next chapter out by next week, sometime (most probably Thursday), but I might not be able to get that done as I'm writing original fiction and I'd like to bang out my first draft in the next week and a half (which is another 50,000 words most likely).

SOURCES:

Homunculus Lore: http://www.hogwartsishere.com/courses/ALCH-601/lesson/848/

Cor Cordis (with an extra-special thanks to EssayofThoughts for talking some stuff out with me):
http://themonsterblogofmonsters.tumblr.com/post/128141152465/cor-cordis-close-cousin-of-the-deadly-hearteater

Old Vengeance English Curse: accredited to EssayofThoughts who shared her lovely list of spells

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What about this case?” Harry asked, weakly, rubbing at his tired eyes. He stifled a yawn in the crease of his elbow as he looked at the next file. “Quirrell, Quirinus. 43. Had a rather odd encounter in an Albanian forest, and now he’s convinced that there’s something growing out of the back of his head.”

Tom snorted, staring balefully at the board against the wall. “Sounds like a job for the Mind Healers.”

“Yes, except they can’t seem to figure it out. It could be Spell Damage,” Harry retorted.

“Next.”

Harry huffed, nodding once.

"Okay…" he drawled out, flicking his wand and sending it flying to the reject pile. It was nearly thirty cases tall. "Lockhart, Gilderoy. 36. He's also a long-term Mind Healing case. Something about a faulty Obliviate. He's *technically* Spell Damage. There must be some sort of Dark mind spell we could use, yes?”

“Another head case? Is Dumbledore just throwing all of his impossible cases at us?” Tom retorted. Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, that’s kind of our job, isn’t it? At least, that’s what you said. We take impossible cases,” Harry said.

“We’re not hospice.”

“We practically are,” Harry retorted with a snide look. Tom rolled his eyes, his nostrils flaring and he waved his hand at Harry.

“What else is there?”

“I just presented 24 cases to you. Not a single one was interesting to you?” Harry demanded.

“No.”

Harry scowled. “Well, then, I’m sorry to say, but that was the last one. So, what are we going to do?” Harry demanded, arms crossed over his chest. He leaned back in the sofa, scowling at the other man. Tom sighed.

“I don’t know. Find me others.”

Harry growled.

“If you’re not going to pick one, maybe we should talk about it,” Harry said, slamming his hand down on the end table. He glared at Tom, but the man didn’t even seem to want to make eye contact with him. It was as if any progress that they had made in the weeks since their last conversation had disappeared.

“Talk about what?”

“Enough, Tom!” Harry snapped. “Cedric is dead and this bothers you. None of the other deaths seemed to faze you at all, but this one day. Why?”

Tom finally looked at him, raising a single perfect black eyebrow. “It doesn’t.”

“Then why are his charts still up?” Harry demanded, flinging his hand to the unchanged board. Some of the writing looked fresh. The diagram of Cedric’s heart was accompanied by a new sketch of the Cor Cordis that Tom had locked away somewhere. “Why are you still working on his case as if you were still alive?”

Littering the room were notes and hypotheses about how to solve the Hearteater Virus case. Cedric’s file never moved from Tom’s desk. It was always open to the initial diagnosis, all of the rest of the parchment spread out like a fan. Just next to his row of quills and column of different colored ink-wells was the list that they had brainstormed together. Stacks of books from deep within the Department of Mysteries were neatly left at the foot of his desk, surrounding it practically.

Tom was still buried in the case as if they still had a chance as if Cedric wasn't dead and cold just down the hall.

“We still have the body and the organism. Cor Cordis tells us a lot about where we went wrong. It’s our duty to the art and science of Healing to pursue even the wrongest of answers,” Tom said defensively. He was glaring at Harry with those burgundy eyes and Harry scoffed because he could see right through him.

“Don’t give me that, Tom. I know you. I *know* you,” Harry said.

Tom pursed his lips. "The tests are almost done. I believe that your theory was on the right track," he said. "We were only off with the execution of the matter. I don't think it was about transforming the existing organ, but transferring the next and somehow using Dark magic that manipulates life with magic, in order to reanimate the heart as well as imbuing it with magic."

“Oh, really?” Harry asked sarcastically. “Is that all?”

Tom continued as if he hadn't heard him. "I've been looking at the candidate that we might have used for Cedric if we'd pursued that path. He is physically healthy in all ways. It's just...his mind is absent. Perhaps we could even consider transplanting the mind or spirit...have you heard of Horcrux magic?"

“Enough, Tom!” Harry snapped. “Cedric is dead.”

“That doesn’t mean that we simply forget the learning possibilities that his death affords,” Tom retorted. Harry scoffed, rolling his eyes at the man. He pointed an accusing finger at him.

“This is about more than that. This is about the fact that you stay late every night *obsessing* over this case. And I don’t know why. I don’t know if it’s because he’s dead or because...because your *ego* can’t take another hit like this. You can’t deal with death!”

Tom’s eyes widened and then narrowed into thin snake-like slits.

“Is that what you think of me?” he hissed, so low and soft that he nearly sounded like a snake.

Harry collapsed against the sofa, burying his face in his hands. He let out a low groan that came from low in his belly.

“I don’t know what to think anymore,” Harry mumbled against the palm of his hands. “I don’t know if I’m a Healer or a murderer. I’ve killed more people than I’ve saved.”

His voice trailed off in a whisper and he let out a long breath. Harry no longer felt like crying. He didn’t think he could cry anymore. Crying was for children, and he wasn’t a child anymore. He had seen far too much death to be a child.

And then, hands were wrapped around his wrists, jugging his hands from his face. Harry’s eyes widened. Tom kneeled in front of him, on one knee, staring at his hands. Tom looked up again with his dark eyes and he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to Harry’s forehead.

“You have a brilliant mind,” Tom whispered quietly. Harry’s eyes fluttered behind his glasses and Tom leaned forward, plucking Harry’s glasses from his nose and folding them in his lap. Harry blinked hard to keep Tom in focus, but the man blurred until he was right *there.* Tom kissed each eyelid, his lips brushing against the delicate skin so gently. “Your eyes catch every one of my mistakes. And your hands?”

Tom lifted Harry’s hands like they were holy. He kissed each of Harry’s palms. Harry’s skin stung under the man’s lips.

“You were born to Heal,” Tom said with such conviction that Harry was reminded of exactly the reason that he had wanted to be a Healer in the first place—because he had thought the very same thing. Tom brought his pulse to his mouth and left a long kiss. “Don’t doubt yourself. Don’t *ever* doubt yourself.”

Harry sighed and slowly pulled his hands away, replacing his glasses on his nose and he stood, walking away. He set his wand to the side, cracking his fingers and he plucked up a quill, brushing it over the edge of Tom’s desk.

Tom turned, falling onto the couch, replacing Harry and he watched the younger man walk behind his desk. Harry looked down at the file.

Amos Diggory’s questions were pinned to the front of Cedric’s file.

Harry mourned the fact that he had never gotten around to answering the man’s questions.

DIAGNOSIS

A man entered the hospital with three others. He did not look out of the ordinary. Some smiled in recognition, others didn't. A man saw a pair of wix weeping—a mother and a father, weeping, as a solemn-faced Healer in bright green spoke to them. A man was no longer a father, but he knew that feeling well. He'd wept all the tears he could.

A man turned towards the trio that had accompanied him.

“He isn’t to leave, do you understand?” a man asked. He felt almost calm. Giddy, even, in a way that he hadn’t been since he was a boy. A man had lived a long, long life. He was so very tired, so tired that his blood felt like it was on fire.

They both nodded, silent and solemn, as they were being paid to be.

“Yes, sir.”

“If he does, you will Summon me,” a man commanded. They nodded again.

“Yes, sir.”

That’s all they knew how to say, a man thought. *Yes, sir. No, sir.* He was so very tired of the three words. He was so tired of it all.

“Actually, after five minutes, no one leaves.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was time to begin.

A man would start at the bottom and work his way upward. He could be anywhere, and a man no longer had access to that part of the Spell Damage floor. Not since he didn’t have any reason to be there anymore.

He went to the stairwell first, walking down it with carefully measured steps. The further down he went, the fewer people that he saw. After all, they all walked upward, ready to take lunch or maybe even finishing shifts. Even after all of his months frequented the dreadful place, he wasn't sure how Healers' schedules worked. Merlin, he hated St. Mungo's. Sterile and cold and terrible. A place of death. This was where everyone came to die.

His wife had died here too.

Sometimes, a man forgot.

Most times, he couldn't.

A man emerged on the basement floor, making his way down the long black hallway to the pharmacy. His eyes darted everywhere. A pair of Healers—a trainee and a full Healer—walked with a basket hanging from the trainee's arm, rattling with potions. Their heads were bent together, discussing something. A man wondered if they'd killed their patient too.

His fingers twitched towards his wand. He refrained.

He had only come for one man and an answer.

A matron was behind the pharmacy counter. She was humming to herself, running her fingers through her short black hair. She might've been pretty if not for her squashed pug nose. The matron didn't notice him, turning around to walk deeper into the pharmacy, probably back towards the stores. A man walked up to the counter, promptly ringing the little brass bell. The matron didn't re-appear immediately.

When she did, her not-pretty face was twisted into a scowl.

"Sir," she began. "The pharmacy is closed to unauthorized personnel after three."

A man pulled out his pocket watch. "It's only five after."

"Exactly. Five after three. I'll have to ask you to leave or to ask an authorized personnel to fetch your potions for you. Now, run along," she said, dismissive and cruel. A man twitched—she reminded a man of *him*. Another Healing professional that lacked compassion or kindness.

"What is your name? I'd like to report you," a man said with narrowed eyes.

The matron looked tired and even angrier. She gnashed her teeth.

"Pansy Parkinson. Go ahead and report me, but I'm telling you that St. Mungo's is *very* strict about these rules," she said, so self-important. She leaned back, tapping her nails against the counter. They were perfectly shiny and red. She still smelled of acetone, like she'd only just gotten a manicure. What respectable matron got a manicure when she should be saving lives? She was still speaking. "A lot of these potions are restricted and for safety purposes, we—"

"Can you tell me where I'd find Healer Tom Riddle or Harry Potter?" a man asked.

The matron's expression soured as he interrupted her.

"Probably on the Spell Damage floor," Parkinson snapped. "Sir, if you have a problem, I can Summon Healer Dumbledore or better yet, the Aurors."

"That won't be necessary."

"Oh, I think it is!" Parkinson retorted. She crossed her arms over her chest. She was pulling out her wand, ready to Summon the necessary people to her. "You can't just come down here and cause a—"

"*Expelliarmus. Sectumsempra*."

A spurt of blood erupted from Parkinson's chest, her white matron robes stained crimson. Parkinson paled rapidly and then she collapsed like a marionette whose strings had been cut. A man gasped, taking a terrified step back. He looked at his wand as if it were not his own. Had he been the one to speak? Had he been the one to *curse* her, to *hurt* her, for threatening to call the Aurors on him?

He peeked over the pharmacy counter and saw her, lying there, eyes wide open. She was taking trembling gasps, trying to hold her own chest closed. A man took a stumble back and shook his head. He steeled himself, his hand tightening around his wand.

A man was Amos Diggory and he had a Healer to find.

DIAGNOSIS

Hermione looked down at her chart, looking at the list of potions that she was meant to fetch for Lizzie Bath. Emmeline treated her as well as a VIP patient, which was unsurprising—the Spectre had been a Muggle and started out as just a neighbor, but Emmeline and she had become best friends. It had taken a while for Lizzie to warm up to her, after finding out that she was Ron's girlfriend, but Hermione had earned her respect, and they were perfectly cordial now.

She finally exited the lift, sighing to herself. Her stomach felt shockingly empty, but she refused to eat. She was almost done with her shift, and Hermione and Ron had a *date* planned. They had been dating for months now, but they had never been able to go on a proper date, not when they were consumed with horrifying hours—especially when Ron's hours were so unpredictable as a mediwizard—and living as nearly broke trainees that sustained themselves primarily on Harry's shitty eggs and Indian takeaway.

But, now, they had a date planned. Even the thought of it made Hermione grin like a silly schoolgirl.

Hermione approached the pharmacy counter, looking deep inside for even a flash of hunter green or white. She reached up, ringing the brass bell that hung nearly the window frame.

"Hello? Hello?" she called.

But, neither a matron or a Healer trainee appeared.

Hermione huffed, irritated beyond belief.

"No one has any work ethic," she muttered to herself, going towards the side door. She pulled out her wand, waving it sharply in that complicated pattern that they only taught employees of St. Mungo's.

The door clicked open and Hermione marched in, her nose held high as she walked towards the back. And then, her legs were promptly thrown out from her and she fell back on her ass, her chart of parchment slipping out of her hands. Hermione grunted as she fell so hard that she knew that her arse would be bruised after class, which wouldn't be a good look for *after* the date.

Hermione frowned, reaching for her chart as she rubbed at her backside.

She couldn't read the potions.

The parchment had been dyed crimson. Hermione's breath caught in her throat and she looked down at her shaking palm. It was bright red too. Finally, she looked further and searched for what she had fallen in. She had slipped in a pool of blood and it was all leaking from the matron that lay on the ground just a meter away.

The girl's entire front was soaked red, one hand clutched at her chest, her other hand reaching for a package of linens and her wand that was just out of reach. The matron had tried to put herself back together but she writhed on the ground, breathing harshly, so hard that it sounded like a death rattle. Hermione let out a shout and she scrambled forward, crawling through the pool of blood towards the matron's side.

"Merlin! Are you okay? Are you okay?" Hermione shouted, her voice going shrill as she pulled out her wand, waving it over the matron's body. The matron was staring at her with glassy eyes, blinking so slow that she shouldn't be blinking at all.

A Dark curse had cut the matron wide open.

"Who did this to you?" Hermione asked. She didn't expect the girl to respond, but she asked again, her voice going louder. She was shaking. She was trying not to, but it was so hard. "*Diffindo*."

The matron's robes tore open and Hermione ripped them wide open. The spell had split open the matron's bra, and there were deep slices in her body from her belly open to her collarbone. Hermione cursed under her breath, her breath turning into hyperventilation. Hermione ran her wand over the matron's body again, whispering spells under her breath but none of them worked.

"What do I do? What do I do?" Hermione whispered under her breath. She didn't know anything about the spell except for its Dark nature. She didn't even know the matron was. Hermione spun around in the pool of blood, reaching for the linens and pressing them against the matron's chest. "Can you hold it there? Can you? Please!"

Hermione knew she was asking for the impossible, but matron seemed to summon a burst of strength and she reached up with her hands to press the linens to the deepest cut right over her left breast. She held it down tight. Hermione jumped up and stumbled into the back of the pharmacy, her wand held aloft.

"*Accio* Blood Replenishing Potions."

Hermione reached up, catching at least three bottles. She fumbled with them and tried to unstopper them with her slippery blood covered hands, and only managed with one. She tipped it open into the matron's mouth and the matron swallowed around it, gulping like it was the Fountain of Youth. Hermione dropped the empty bottle and continued with a quick succession of the next two potions.

“Okay, okay,” Hermione whispered to herself.

What could mend cursed wounds? What could pull this girl back together?

Unicorn hair.

Except...the rest of it was locked away in Emmeline’s office.

“*FUCK!*” Hermione shrieked. She nodded to herself and reached for three more rolls of linen and pulled them open. If she had to, she’d just wrap the girl closed until she could get the unicorn hair necessary. She sat back on her haunches and got ready to go to work. “I’m going to put you together. I swear...I *won’t* let you die.”

She felt those words in her bones.

The matron reached up, pressing a bloody hand to Hermione's cheek. Her cracked, dry-lipped moved around air, once, twice, and she whispered, as dry as sandpaper, "*Riddle…f-find Riddle...”*

DIAGNOSIS

“Hey, Mum,” Neville said with a nervous smile as he walked into the room, a tray cradled in his arms as he entered the room with lunch. He hesitated only for a second when he spotted the two people that sat at Alice’s bedside. “Oh. Hello, Dad.”

“Hey, Nev,” Frank said with a wave of his hand.

Augusta Longbottom scowled. “Not going to say hi to your dear old Gran,” she asked.

“He was getting there,” Alice snapped, her ferocious gaze turning kind when she smiled at her son. Neville gave a shaky smile back.

“Hello, Gran,” Neville said stiffly. “If I’d known that you both were going to be here, I would’ve brought more food.”

“We already ate. Your father and I enjoyed a nice lunch in Haven Alley,” Gran said firmly. Neville nodded in understanding and he went to sit in the chair on the other side of Alice. With one hand, he balanced the tray and with the other, he waved his wand, floating the tray between Alice and Neville.

“Burger for you, Mum,” Neville said.

“Should she really be eating that in her state?” Gran asked.

“Augusta, Nev is the Healer here. And I’m not here for any physical reasons,” Alice said, her lips curling into a sneer at the thought of her failed psych examination. Frank leaned forward, kissing her lips into a pout and he smiled at her.

“You’ll be fine, Mum. Come on. Eat,” Neville encouraged. He reached for a chip, grinning around it when Alice tried to smack his hand away. Gran pursed her lips in disapproval.

“How is your training proceeding, Neville? What are you specializing in again?” Gran asked.

“Potions and plant poisonings.”

“And we’re very proud!” Frank added, a careful look in his eyes as he regarded his mother. Gran pursed her lips and nodded.

“Do you do anything besides treat green thumb every day?”

“I’m currently on a team to treat a girl with a serious addiction to mod potions. She’s wasting away, so there’s that,” Neville said, his tone sharper than he’d ever used directed at Gran. Gran gasped, looking offended, but Alice was smiling *for real,* for the first time in days. “I’m also treating an older man with bloodroot poisoning and a few other cases that I’m consulting on.”

All code for: *I’m thriving*.

“You’re doing brilliantly, Nev. I’m sure the *entire* family is proud,” Alice said. Her eyes flashed as she regarded her mother-in-law.

Gran hummed, nodding. “Yes, we’re all very proud.”

Frank leaned forward, arms crossed over his chest and he grinned at both his wife and son.

“It’s good you’re here now, Nev. Your mum got her second Mind Healing evaluation moved up. Dumbledore will be administering it,” Frank said with a beam. Every time he looked at either Neville or his wife, his eyes lit up with pride and Neville couldn’t help but smile back at his dad.

“Which is good because we *both* need to be back on duty,” Alice said firmly. With one hand, she devoured her hamburger and with her other hand, she reached out to grab Frank’s hand. She squeezed hard.

“I think we may need a vacation, to be honest. We’re not as young as we used to be,” Frank returned. He looked over at Neville. “What do you say, Nev?”

“I can’t really get off as a trainee,” Neville said. “But...I could stand to visit more.”

He said this, looking at Gran. Gran's expression softened and her lips quirked in the tiniest smile.

"Well, that's all we can ask," Gran said, her voice rough. "I just think—"

Alice held up her hand and the entire room fell silent, even Gran.

"Something's wrong," Alice breathed, softly.

The quartet of Longbottoms all went still, looking at one another and then they all slowly turned to Alice. Alice was still, like a ravenous wolf that had caught the scent of downed but fleeing prey. She tilted her head and took a deep breath like she was smelling the air. A terrible light entered her eyes and slowly she slid from her bed onto unsteady feet. Frank reached out to grab her and she found her bearings, taking her wand from her bedside.

"What is it, Mum?" Neville asked, the hair on the back of his neck standing straight up.

"Ali?" Frank said in a hushed voice.

Alice ran a hand through her short hair. "There's something *wrong*."

DIAGNOSIS

"Hannah, the date was exquisite, I tell you. We spent hours discussing the possibility of heliopaths over homemade sandwiches. And...well, you'll be the first to know, but come this summer, I might be taking a bit of a sabbatical," Luna beamed as the pair walked down the stairs.

Hannah's eyes widened at her teacher's words. "A sabbatical? It's really serious, then?" Hannah asked in wonder.

Luna had been dating Rolf Scamander for some time. Hannah suspected that they had been talking since the St. Mungo's fundraiser, and it had only snowballed from there. They were perfectly well-suited for one another, from what Hannah could tell. She had only met Rolf once, but he seemed just as eccentric as Luna and twice as enthusiastic. Where Luna was a serene center, Rolf was erratic and excitable. They made quite the pair, if a little exhausting.

Hannah couldn't imagine spending much time with the both of them. She thought she might go mad just from trying to keep up.

"We'll be hunting Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and I'd like him to meet Daddy. That's an event all on itself," Luna said. She held open the door for Hannah, waving her through. "How are you and Neville, by the way? Now that he no longer has a crush on Harry."

Hannah scowled at the very reminder. Harry Potter was a sore spot for her—he was talented and witty and attractive. It was no wonder that Neville had had feelings for the other man.

But, Harry was also a bit of an arsehole who was terribly in love with his boss, so there was that.

“I think we’re doing well. I’m having dinner with him and his parents when his mother is discharged,” Hannah said nervously. They walked towards the pharmacy in step with one another, their heels clicking against the black tile floor.

Luna’s lips tilted into a smile. “What a wonderful step. I advise taking a nice bottle of onion wine to soften them up.”

Hannah didn’t even think to question Luna’s words. “But, his mother, Alice, makes me—”

“Hello! HELLO! HANNAH! *HELP!*”

Hannah and Luna looked at one another with wide eyes for just a half second before they bolted down the rest of the long hallway, wands held out in front of them. The pharmacy door was wide open, but no one stood in the window at attention. Luna practically slid into the pharmacy and her hand flew to her mouth almost immediately. Hannah was only a few moments behind her and her stomach turned immediately. She swallowed back all the bile from the back of her throat and saliva that had gathered on her tongue.

“Oh my God…” Hannah whispered to herself as she looked at the scene before her.

Hermione was kneeling on the floor in a puddle of blood, crimson smeared across her high cheekbones and the front of her hunter green arms. She was working furiously, her wand flying through the air as she Summoned linens and pressed them to the open wound. The injured matron was prone on the floor, clearly under the influence of a stasis charm. Her breathing was steady and was probably the only reason she hadn’t bled out in her panic. Still, Hannah could see that the matron’s wounds hadn’t stopped bleeding. It had only been slowed.

“What happened?” Luna asked, getting down to business immediately. Even as she spoke, she fell to her knees and crawled forward, waving her wand to assess the problem.

“I don’t *know.* I don’t know. Just blood. So much blood,” Hermione gasped. Her bun of curls was coming loose, and she raised a shaky, bloody hand to the strands. Hannah reached forward to grab it, squeezing tight. Hermione looked at her wild dark eyes, but the feeling of Hannah’s hand in hers seemed to ground her. “I...I opened the door because no one was there. She was bleeding. It’s a Dark curse. I don’t...I don’t know which *one*. She said ‘Riddle’.”

Hannah gasped, her free hand flying to her face.

“Riddle did this to her?” Hannah demanded.

Hermione shook her head hard. More curls flew free, cork-spiraling outward.

“No. No. I think...I think someone else did it to her. And they’re looking for Riddle,” Hermione whispered. She turned to Luna, her eyes furious and wide. Hannah thought she might be crying, except her face was contorted in righteous fury and terror. “I wrapped her

tight in linens to slow the bleeding, but the binding is hard because it constricts her breath too. I don't...I didn't know what to do. I've been giving her Blood Replenishing potions."

"That's good. You're doing well, Hermione. That will be all. I will take over from here," Luna said firmly. Hermione deflated with her relief. Luna brushed the girl's hair from her face and leaned forward to get a clear look at her. "This is Pansy Parkinson. She's a matron on the Spell Damage ward."

"Oh Merlin," Hannah breathed. She looked over at Luna. "What do you need me to do?"

"I don't know yet. I don't know the spell either. This will require a Spell Damage specialist. But...there's someone here, you said. At least, you think someone did this to her. Someone dangerous. Someone from the hospital?" Luna asked.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself. She was nearly twitching. She shook her head hard again. Hannah felt nearly detached. Hermione was covered in so much *blood*, and the matron was so so pale.

"No. The pharmacy door was locked. Someone did it through the window. Just...just *cursed* her," Hermione said, spitting out the vile words with such vitriol that Hannah flinched away from it all.

Luna nodded, processing her words with a more serious expression than usual.

"Okay," she said softly. She stood up, pulling up her wand and waved it. "*Expecto Patronum*. *Dissero Patronae*. Healer Dumbledore, there is an intruder in the hospital. A matron is down. Summon the Aurors."

A silvery hare burst into being, darting around the room from the pool of blood to the counter and then it was off, disappearing down the hallway and zipping up through the ceiling. Suddenly, the entire idea that someone was running through the hospital hurting people crashed over Hannah. She let out a terrified yelp that made Hermione flinch so violently, she nearly fell into the patient, scrambling to protect her from nothing but Hannah's own fright.

"Pull yourselves together," Luna warned as she paced in front of them. "Okay...I...she has to be taken to the Spell Damage floor."

"No!" Hannah yelped. Both Hermione and Luna turned to her. "If someone is after Riddle, that's where they'll be going."

Hermione went so still, she was nearly like a statue. And then, she was on her feet, stumbling towards the door, clutching on the doorframe. Hannah's mouth dropped open and she reached for Hermione even from where she knelt by Pansy Parkinson's side.

"Where are you going?" Luna asked calmly as if she knew Hermione's answer.

"I need to find my family. I need to find Ron and Neville," Hermione said firmly. And then her face contorted in terror and she shook her head. "I need to find *Harry*."

And then she took off down the hallway, without a look back, leaving bloody footprints in her wake.

Hannah spun back around to face Luna. “What do we do?” she demanded.

“I’m the head of the Children’s Ward. Children are in danger. I’m putting St. Mungo’s in lockdown,” Luna said quietly. She looked so serene, but her eyes blazed with a quiet fury that someone had had the nerve to come into a place of healing and *hurt* someone. Luna raised her wand above her head and sent up a shower of black sparks.

That was when the ringing started.

DIAGNOSIS

“Bella, you look *ravishing*,” Rodolphus purred as he looked over the E&T desk. If Bellatrix was at all impressed by anything that Rodolphus was saying, she didn’t show it. Instead, she carefully kept her eyes trained on the log.

It was rather quiet today. No one had really come in for anything emergency-inducing. It set Ron on edge, a little. Since he’d become a mediwizard, he’d been pulled from bed or the hospital at all hours, gallivanting around the British Isles and even popping over to the continent on one remarkable occasion. He rather lived for doing his job, being the last line of defense. But, once again, he’d been reduced to the guy that folded the linens by hand.

Apparently, Bellatrix didn’t like how stiff magic made them so he had to do them by hand. He had once asked her who did it when she didn’t have a student, and she glared at him so hard that Ron was surprised he didn’t burst into flames.

“I always look ravishing,” Bellatrix drawled.

“We should get dinner tonight. You and I,” Rodolphus drawled with a smirk that he probably thought looked charming. He looked rather smarmy to Ron, but maybe Bellatrix was into that.

She was trying not to smirk—he could tell because she was scowling so hard—so maybe she was.

“We’re going to drinks with Tom tonight.”

That was also new. Ron didn’t know if Harry knew and he wasn’t sure if he should even tell Harry, but Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Riddle were apparently friends again. Ron sometimes saw Riddle waiting for the pair of them at this very desk, looking very, *very* impatient to get on with his life as if everything about E&T bored him. Riddle liked his glory and there wasn't much glory in being covered in blood after racing out at three in the morning after a reckless Auror.

“But, we could get dinner. Before drinks,” Rodolphus said, leaning over the desk, tapping his fingers over his chin. He was only a few inches away from her. “You and I both know Tom will probably *forget* drinks because he’s obsessing about the only two things that matter in his life—Death and Harry Potter.”

Ron’s nose wrinkled. Merlin’s saggy Y-fronts.

“I’m getting really tired of hearing him whine about Harry *freaking*Potter,” Bellatrix drawled.

She said Harry’s name slow and high, like that was his name, her tone and all.

"Well, the man's never been in love before. He's emotionally stunted. It's our job to listen, as good friends," Rodolphus said firmly. He leaned forward. "But, you and I...we've never been *just* friends, Bella.”

Bellatrix huffed. “Haven’t we, Rodolphus?”

"No, we haven't. So, I made a reservation at—"

Slowly, the conversation seemed to be drowned out as a ringing began in the base of Ron's neck. It slowly spiraled upward, curling around his ear and then, just as it got so loud that Ron thought he was about to blackout, black sparks erupted from the tip of his wand. Ron looked up at Bellatrix and Rodolphus, alarmed. Rodolphus was still, staring at his wand and the sparks, while Bellatrix had one hand still half-raised to her ear.

“What was *that*?” Ron asked.

Before Bellatrix could respond, the doors to E&T were thrown open. Ron gaped as he took in the grotesque sight of Hannah Abbott smeared in blood. She had blood splatters on the hem of her robes and some smeared on her face and hands. She was both pale and terrified, and yet, a strength resided in her eyes.

Everyone turned to stare at her and she steeled herself.

“What’s going on?” Bellatrix demanded, slowly getting to her feet.

“Every patient and guest needs to hide. Every door must be locked. We’re in lockdown. Someone is loose in the hospital and they are considered *dangerous*. That. Is. All,” Hannah said, weighing every single one of her words.

The few patients and guest that remained screamed first. The matrons did their best to hush the patients, not a single one giving way to fear. Bellatrix and Rodolphus spun into action. Bellatrix rushed to the doors, locking the visiting entrance’s doors, and sending the curtains flying closed. Rodolphus was at Hannah’s side in moments. Ron was at his feet, following after him.

“Who’s in the hospital? Is anyone hurt?” Rodolphus hissed under his breath.

Hannah's eyes hardened and she sagged. "Yes...a matron. She was hurt. They cursed her. Luna sent me up here to warn E&T because it's the only other entrance beside the main one."

“Who is it? What was he after?” Ron asked. Rodolphus looked at him from the corner of his eye, annoyed, but Ron ignored him, staring intently at Hannah. “Who found the matron?”

“Hermione,” Hannah said. Ron’s heart stopped. “Luna and I were going to the pharmacy and we saw her, trying to put her back together with linens but it’s a cursed wound and she didn’t have anything on her. I don’t even think dittany would’ve done anything.”

“Do you know what he’s after?” Rodolphus asked.

Hannah bit her bottom lip and looked over at Ron. “She...she said that the matron said the word ‘*Riddle*’.”

Ron paled and his rocked. Rodolphus’ nostrils flared.

“Tom’s in danger?”

Both mediwizards whirled around. Bellatrix stood there, eyes wide in fear, her wand clasped between both of her hands.

“I don’t know,” Hannah whispered, her voice cracking.

Rodolphus grabbed Bellatrix’s hand. “You know it’ll be fine. No one could ever get the best of Tom. He’s an excellent duellist and powerful.”

"He hasn't practiced dueling in *years,* Rodolphus. He’s a damn Healer,” Bellatrix snapped. “We have to go to him—”

“No,” Rodolphus barked. “We have patients. We have to be safe. Tom is a big boy—”

“He’s our family, Rodolphus!” Bellatrix roared, her voice echoing.

Ron heard someone begin to cry, but it sounded like it was coming from down a family.

“I know!” Rodolphus barked back. “I know he is! But, we can’t *do* anything for him. We don’t even know who’s after him. And he wouldn’t want us leaving patients. We stay *here*.”

“If he dies—”

“He’s not going to die!” Rodolphus snarled.

Ron slowly turned to Hannah. “He’s after Riddle?” Ron whispered.

Hannah looked scared. “Yes.”

“So...Harry is with him.”

“Yes.”

Ron swallowed hard. “Where. Is. Hermione?”

Hannah looked even more scared than before. “She...she said that she was going to find you. She said that...she had to find Harry.”

Of course, she did. Hermione and Harry. The twisted duo. The brother-sister team from hell. His friend—one of his best friends—and the love of his life. Hermione was always so sure that Ron could take care of himself, but never sure about Harry who was a mess and magnet for trouble. Harry who would get himself killed because of his fucking *ex*-boyfriend.

“I have to go,” Ron said quietly.

Bellatrix and Rodolphus looked up from their squabble.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Bellatrix hissed.

Ron shook his head. “Yes, I am. That’s my girlfriend, the love of my life, and my best friend. I have to go. Riddle may be your family, and you may be sure that he can take care of himself. But, Harry and Neville and *Hermione* are my family. I have to go.”

And then, he ran.

DIAGNOSIS

“You look well,” Draco said, leaning back in his chair.

It wasn’t a lie. Romilda’s face didn’t look so much like a skull anymore, even though she still had that rather nasty sneer pasted on her face. Her eyes looked softer, somehow, though, which was good, all in all.

“I got letters from my friends. They want to visit me. They got permission from Headmaster Dippet, but he said that he needs permission from Healer Greengrass,” Romilda said with a scowl. She was glaring at him because she knew what that meant.

“Ah, and that means she needs permission from *me*. I am an obstacle in your grand plan to see your friends. Do you require me to be an obstacle?” Draco asked, almost too formally. Romilda looked surprised by his words and Draco nearly smirked.

He oh-so enjoyed surprising her. Romilda was smart, but she thought she was smarter than she really was. She thought she could read him. Draco enjoyed the moments where he could prove her wrong.

“Are you asking if I want to see my friends? Why wouldn’t I?” Romilda retorted with all the vitriol she could muster. It wasn’t much, but she *was* a teenager, so she always had a little bit of fury in her voice.

“You look different from the last time you saw them. How does that make you feel?” Draco asked carefully.

Romilda faltered. "I mean...they'll have to see me sometime. They might as well see me how I really am—ugly."

“You think you’re ugly?” Draco asked.

“Didn’t I just say that?” Romilda retorted. “Don’t you think so?”

Draco looked at the young woman. She was emaciated, though gaining weight—at least eight pounds since she was admitted, which was pretty great when she didn’t always eat all of her food. She was walking with only some assistance, though she tired quickly. Romilda was also keeping up with her studies, and she always had time to be sharp-tongued towards her parents. In an effort to keep something beautiful about her world, she’d covered the hospital room with tapestries and scarves of varying pinks and she currently had a red and gold scarf wrapped around her head. Apparently, it was a Gryffindor thing.

So, Romilda was on her way to being healthy. Her deviated septum had been corrected and her cracked lips were healing. But, even when they weren’t, even when she had been a skeleton of a person—

“I have *never* thought you were ugly,” Draco said firmly. His conviction seemed to shock Romilda. “You were sick. You *are* sick. But, you are not ugly.”

“Whatever,” Romilda mumbled under her breath.

Draco’s lips quirked into a small smile. “Would you say Fawkes is helping you?”

Fawkes wasn’t great during a regular therapy session—Romilda was distracted by him, too distracted to share anything meaningful. But, during her physical therapy and simply when she was feeling especially down, her eyes lit up when Albus brought Fawkes in. The great phoenix seemed to have taken a shine to Romilda too, cooing gently and not burning her when he settled in her frail lap.

“Yes. I guess. Are you going to let me friends come?” Romilda snapped.

“Do you want me to?” Draco asked.

Romilda hesitated. Before Draco could ask a follow-up question, his head began to ring. It started low, in the base of his neck and crawled upwards, curling in the shell of his ear. Draco drew his wand and watched it spit black sparks all over Romilda's bed. Romilda's eyes widened and she leaned forward, staring at it. She had been in the hospital long enough to know what red sparks meant, but black was new.

“What’s going on? What does that mean?” Romilda asked.

Draco paled and he shot up from his chair, waving his wand. The door slammed shut and the curtain flipped down. The lock clicked into place. Draco reached forward, grabbing Romilda by the hand.

“You stay here. You do not move. Do you hear me, Romilda?” Draco asked in his sternest voice. He let go before she could answer and buried one hand in his slicked back blonde hair,

cracking the veneer of gel. "*Merde*. *Qu'est-ce qui se passe? MERDE!*"

Romilda paled even more dramatically until she was as white as chalk. "What's happening, Malfoy? *Draco!*"

The way she said his name—so scared and so *childish,* because really she was still a *child*, no matter how much she wanted to pretend she wasn't—stilled him. Draco looked at her. Her eyes were so wide in her face. Her skinny fingers were shaking. She clutched nervously at the end of her blanket, picking at it and fraying the fabric.

"Something is wrong. Luna Lovegood just put St. Mungo's into lockdown and I do not know why," Draco said sharply.

"Lockdown? What does that mean?"

"When children are in danger, Luna Lovegood, as head of the Children's Ward and a Magical Bugs and Diseases specialist, can shut down the hospital. No unauthorized personnel can leave. But, there isn't an outbreak...something's *wrong*," Draco whispered. He shook his head and then stalled again because—

Astoria.

"Astoria," he whispered.

"Healer Greengrass?" Romilda asked. "What's wrong with her? Is she okay?"

In the face of tension, Romilda's mask slipped.

"I don't know," Draco muttered and wasn't that terrifying. Astoria was everything to him. Astoria was the love of his life, even if she constantly berated him for being a snob or being mean. And he knew that she loved him too, even though she had a hard time verbalizing such things. *Astoria*.

"Go make sure she's okay!" Romilda snapped.

Draco stared at her wide eyes, shaking his head. "I-I...I do not know what's 'appening," he stammered, his accent growing stronger and slurring with nerves.

"Well, go figure it out," Romilda demanded. "Go find her! You can't let her get hurt!"

Draco blinked and he walked to Romilda's side, taking her hand. "You do not even like—"

"Yes, I do! She's kind to me when I'm never kind to her. And she keeps my parents away. She makes sure that I stay alive. Like you. Go help her. Find *her*," Romilda demanded.

Draco let out a shaky breath. "You must 'ide."

Romilda slipped out of the bed and she was shaking. She pulled the blanket with her and slowly got to her knees, rolling under the bed. Draco kneeled down, reaching under the bed, and he rapped his wand atop her head, casting the Disillusionment Charm. He watched

Romilda fade away into the background until he could no longer see anything but a small lump of blankets piled on the ground. Even still, he felt a hand slip into his and the small hand squeezed tight.

“You make me want to be brave, Malfoy. And I think you’re brave too,” she whispered.

Draco pulled back slowly, nodding even though he couldn’t see her. He stood up, brushing off the dust from his hunter green robes and slowly he walked towards the door, unlocking it with a wave of his wand. He walked out and saw the deserted hallway and his heart stopped.

It was so quiet. A hospital should never be so quiet.

People should be there, saving lives. But, no—every door was closed and locked. Of course, it was. It was the Children's Ward. No one knew the reason for the lockdown. Though Draco didn't believe it was an outbreak, it was a possibility, he supposed. Children would catch it first, especially the sick girl in the room behind him. Draco closed the door behind him and cast the three most powerful locking spells that he knew. He turned back around and took a deep breath.

Okay. *Astoria*.

He took off down the hallway at a run, his wand held out in front of him. He went for the stairs first and then stopped on the first landing. He didn’t know where to look. But, he *could*. He held out his hand, balancing his wand on his palm.

“*Point me,* Astoria Greengrass,” he commanded.

The wand spun around in his hand before decidedly pointing west. But, that didn’t tell him up or down. *Merde*.

He would just run downstairs first. He flew down the steps, practically leaping from landing to landing until he got to the next floor. He threw the door open and his heart stopped when he nearly crashed into someone else.

Ronald Weasley looked particularly intimidating in his mediwizard robes, his plague mask hanging from his neck. There was no humor in his face now, only a hard look in his dark eyes that spoke of how perfectly unforgiving her felt at that moment.

“What are you doing, Weasley?” Draco demanded. “We are on lockdown.”

“I could say the same for you, Malfoy. You have anything to do with this?” Weasley asked, taking a step forward, pressing the tip of his wand against Draco’s neck. Draco gasped, eyes widening and he tried to lift his own wand, but Weasley shook his head, taking another step closer. “I’m warning you—”

“No,” Draco barked. “I do not know what’s going on. I do not know where *Astoria* is.”

Weasley heard the desperation in his voice so he relaxed slightly.

“There’s an intruder in the hospital. They cursed a matron. And they’re after Riddle. And you know who’s with Riddle? Harry. And you know who’s going to go after Harry because they’re ridiculously co-dependent? *Hermione*, so if you’ll excuse me—” Weasley started brusquely. He went to go up the stairs but Draco shook his head, reaching forward to grab the back of Weasley’s robes. Weasley jerked to a stop and nearly stumbled.

“You can not go alone. What if the intruder is up there. You said he cursed a matron?” Draco snapped. He froze, nostrils flaring. “Where is Longbottom?”

“Why? Weasley hissed.

“Because if Tori finds Longbottom first, she will come searching for me or she will go upstairs if she zinks zat she can help, and I will not let ‘er die because of your *stupid* friend, Potter, and ‘is equally *stupid* boyfriend, Riddle,” Draco roared, his voice echoing on the staircase, his irritation bouncing off the walls.

Weasley looked furious, but suddenly, a thoughtful expression crossed his face.

“There’s strength in numbers, Malfoy,” Weasley said quietly. “You help me find Hermione and Harry and I’ll help you find Astoria. Deal?”

Draco weighed his options. If he came across the intruder, he’d be a goner. Draco could admit to himself that he was a bit of a coward, and he was terrified. But, Weasley didn’t look scared at all. He looked hardened and ready.

So, Draco said, “*D’accord.*”

DIAGNOSIS

"It's so lovely to see you both, especially on a non-eventful occasion," Albus said with a beaming smile, a twinkle in his blue eyes. Lily couldn't help but smile back, even with how stilted it was.

"I had an appointment with my Mind Healer. I couldn't pass through without popping in for some tea," Lily admitted fully. She lifted her own cup of tea as if to demonstrate this and sipped it. She looked at Lavender from the corner of her eye, but the girl was intent on her little building of sugar cubes as if she was six instead of sixteen. Lily rolled her eyes in amusement.

Albus was still grinning.

“Ah, to be young and carefree,” Albus said with a smile.

Lavender looked up, clueless. She tucked her chin-length hair behind her ear. “I’m not young or carefree. I have many cares,” Lavender said firmly. “Albus, I heard there’s a girl from Gryffindor here. Romilda Vane? Is she okay?”

“It depends on what you’ve heard,” Albus said slowly. “You know I can’t reveal confidential information.”

Lavender sighed. “I *know*. But, I’m worried and we never got along before. She’s very...well, she’s quite mean, you see. She knows she’s clever and pretty, and so, she makes other people feel horrible. And she tried to flirt with my girlfriend, while I was away and she’s not even a lesbian, so I don’t care—”

“Your girlfriend?” Lily barked in surprise. “You have a girlfriend?”

“I talk about Ginny all the time, Mum!” Lavender laughed.

“You talk about Ronald Weasley too, but I didn’t assume he was your *boyfriend*,” Lily said. “Aren’t they siblings?”

“What can I say? Good looks run in the family, and I think I have a thing for red hair,” Lavender said, tapping her chin. Lily let out a surprised bark of laughter, and Lavender laughed. “Ginny is infinitely better than Won-Won, though.”

“You should invite over for dinner,” Lily said firmly. “I’d like to meet her.”

“You’d scare her away!” Lavender laughed.

Albus laughed gently. “If she’s scared away by your formidable father, then she’s not worth you anyway, my dear,” Albus said, reaching forward to pat Lavender’s hand. Lavender smiled back at the man, shrugging a shoulder.

"By the way, do you have any more lemon sherberts?" she asked.

“The cupboard that way,” Albus said.

Lavender stood up and walked towards the cupboard, both Albus and Lily watching her. She had only the slightest of limps, but that had all but disappeared. Her scars were still visible in certain light, but they were silvery and thin, nothing like they would’ve been without the unicorn hair. Lavender dug around in the cupboard, searching for the sweets.

“Albus...I wanted to talk to you, though. About returning. Somewhat,” Lily said, her voice stilted. “I was speaking with Harry, a few weeks ago. And we talk about Healing and alchemy. I forgot how I much I missed it.”

“So, you’d like your job back? I can find your salary in the budget somewhere—” Albus said, sounding delighted.

“No,” Lily blurted out. Albus paused, eyes wide. “I, just, really enjoyed teaching in France. But, I realized that not every Healer trainee gets the classes at Hogwarts or the teaching I delivered in France. I think there needs to be an intensive Healing programme. Something that properly prepares trainees so they don’t feel like they’re just *thrown* into the deep end.”

Albus frowned. “I’m intrigued. It’s different. Very non-traditional.”

“Muggles call it medical school. I think it’s a good idea. To learn for a year or two about the intimates of the body and the different paths of healing. Paths of Healing that aren’t so obvious. So, that not everyone goes into St. Mungo’s, or any hospital for that matter, thinking that they can just do Spell Damage for the glory of it all,” Lily said firmly.

Albus’ eyes had that twinkle again. “Okay. And your job?”

"Well, I want to develop the curriculum first, so that will take about a year, I think. In the meantime, I'd like to consult—"

Before Lily could finish her thought, a silvery hare burst into the room, darting around it before it hovered over their tea, facing Dumbledore. The hare’s mouth opened and Luna Lovegood’s words burst forth.

Healer Dumbledore, there is an intruder in the hospital. A matron is down. Summon the Aurors.

“Fuck!” Lavender shouted as she bumped the top of her head on the inside of the cupboard.

Albus looked furious and he stood up fast, his wand in his hand in the next second. Lavender rolled away from the cupboard, looking at Lily with wide eyes.

“Mum?” Lavender whispered.

“Stay here, Lavender” Lily said sharply and she stood to her feet, rolling up her sleeves. She shot her daughter a warning look. “I’m not kidding. You stay *right* here. You do not move.”

Albus nodded in agreement. “Lavender, send for the Aurors in my fireplace. Call your father.”

Lavender nodded with wide eyes and she scurried to the fireplace, fumbling with her wand before she hissed, “*Incendio*.”

Lily and Albus were out of the office before Lavender could even grab at the Floo powder. They briskly walked down the hall.

“Where do we go?” Lily asked.

"The main hall. The wardstone is there. It records every person that enters. I will see who is here," Albus hissed through clenched teeth. The pair took the stairs two at a time. Lily felt a chill run down her spine. Everything was so deserted. The stairwell felt too deserted.

But, as soon as they emerged on the main hall, sound boomed in Lily’s ear, so loud that she felt nearly deaf.

“*INCARCEROUS!*”

Lily ducked under the jet of red light and she spun as she looked at the caster.

Alice, Frank, Augusta, and *Neville* Longbottom stood by the Apparition Zone, all in dueling stances, hands above their head. Neville—who Lily had known to be soft, from Harry's descriptions—had a hard look in his eyes, trained on the three wixen that stood by the main entrance. Behind the wall of Longbottoms were a sea of people that were attempting to Apparate, but didn't seem to be able to get anywhere.

“There’s an Anti-Apparition spell up,” Lily hissed to Albus.

Albus nodded. They looked at the duel that was happening. The three wixen were formidable, dueling fiercely and with deadly force, but the Longbottoms had a long history as Aurors, and Alice Longbottom was not someone to trifle with. She was Titan.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” one wix hissed. The green spell nearly crashed into Neville if it wasn’t for Augusta’s quick thinking to Summon a couch to take the brunt of the spell. It exploded, but with a flick of Frank’s wand, a charm slowed the speed of the destruction and another twist made the debris turn to dust.

“Oh, so you think you can try to kill my son? I don’t think you know who I am. I will *eviscerate* you,” Alice said with a wicked laugh. She ran forward, sliding on her knees, and lashed out with a spell of purple fire, whipping it around to latch around the wix’s wand arm.

The wix screamed, collapsing to their knees as blisters ran up the right side of their body, inflaming their eyes and causing them to go blue with temporary blindness.

“*Stupefy!*” Neville snapped and the witch collapsed, properly knocked out.

Without another word, Frank flicked his wand, sending the other wizard flying into the wall, crashing into a heap. He twitched once, but Frank sent a spell at him and he collapsed good and proper. The last witch took a terrified step back. She was trembling, slowly raising her hands, but Alice was on her feet, rushing at them and she body slammed her with all of the strength her small body held.

The witch flew backward and Alice leaped forward, lashing out her wand again and whipping black cord around her neck.

“I...surrender…” the witch rasped.

Augusta marched forward, eyes hard. “We *know*.”

“Then...knock me out,” the witch hissed, spitting between her teeth, staring up at the pair of witches with furious eyes.

“Oh, you don’t get to be knocked out,” Alice hissed. “You’re the last one standing. You get to answer my questions. Do you know who I am?”

The witch scoffed. “Am I supposed to?”

“You should. You’re hired help, aren’t you? Well, listen up. I am Titan, and I have a license to kill *and* torture when it is necessary. I don't think you want me to use either of those methods, but I will because you threatened these people and you threatened my son. I don't like people

that threaten my son," she said, her Irish brogue growing harsher as she straddled the witch's lap, and held her tight by the lapels of her robe.

Albus finally stepped forward. “I don’t think that’s necessary, my dear Alice. I think that they will answer any of your questions,” Albus said coldly.

“You think?” Alice said. She sounded far too cheerful for someone that had just threatened to torture and kill a person.

“I don’t know, sweetheart. Neville almost just died. Maybe they deserve it,” Frank said coldly.

Augusta smiled. “I concur.”

“I *don’t*,” Neville barked.

The three elder Longbottoms turned to stare at him. Neville glared back at them.

“This is a *hospital*. We don’t kill people here. We save lives,” Neville snapped. “Don’t...we *don’t* kill people here.”

Alice’s smile dimmed slowly. She looked solemn and slowly she nodded. “Okay, Nev. Okay.”

She stood up and grabbed the witch around the neck, dragging her to the nearest chair and throwing her down into it. Albus finally turned away and looked at Lily.

“There are guests trying to escape,” Lily said quietly. “Neville, come.”

Neville took a shaky step away from the interrogation his family was conducting and followed after Lily and Albus. Albus lifted his wand, pointing at his neck.

“*Sonorous*,” he whispered. In a much larger voice, he boomed, “Hello! I am Head Healer Albus Dumbledore! We are currently under lockdown! No one can leave until the Aurors get here! They are on their way as I speak! If everyone could calm down!”

Neville nodded as he watched the people grow more panicked and then slightly more calmed as they realized who Albus was and what had just occurred. Neville turned away and looked at Lily Evans. She looked stern and slightly frightened, and she was staring at him.

“Are you alright?” she asked coolly.

“I’m...I’m okay.”

“Do you know where my son is? If he’s okay?” Lily asked quietly.

Neville swallowed hard. “No.”

Lily looked lost for a long moment and then she took a long breath, nodding. “Okay. Thank you.”

Neville took a step towards her, his hands fluttering with the urge to comfort and placate when someone crashed into him, their arms wrapping around him. Neville looked at his armful of Astoria Greengrass and he gaped.

“Neville!” she gasped. “I do not know...I do not know where Draco is. I cannot find him!”

She sounded dangerously close to tears, shivering.

"Have you been looking for him? We've been on lockdown for twenty minutes. You're supposed to be hiding!" Neville hissed.

“Twenty minutes?” Lily asked, spinning to face him. “We just got the Patronus ten minutes ago, at least.”

Astoria looked shocked to see her teacher. “I...I felt the ringing. And the black sparks. I can not find Draco. I went to the Children’s Ward. I tried to get into Romilda Vane’s room. He’s supposed to be there. When I got in, she was under the bed and she said that he left to find *me*,” Astoria said. She was shaking so hard that her teeth were chattering.

Lily’s hand landed on her shoulders, grounding her. “Okay. *Okay*. I think they put up strange wards to alter communication within the hospital. We’re going to find Draco, Astoria. It is okay. He is looking for you. You should stay in one place.”

“I can’t. I *cannot*. I have to find him,” Astoria said firmly.

“Albus! We’ve got a name,” Alice said through clenched teeth.

As one, the group of Healers went towards the Longbottoms. Alice was kneeling between the witch’s legs, looking up at her with a fierce expression. The witch looked dazed.

“What did you do?” Albus asked coldly.

“Legilimency. She’s a hired goon. She wasn’t going to tell us anything,” Frank said.

Albus scowled at the idea. “You mishandled her mind.”

“I have a *name* and a *mission*. That’s all that matters,” Alice retorted, standing to her feet. She was shorter than Albus by at least three heads, but she still looked strong.

“What is it?” Lily asked. “What’s going on?”

Alice’s lips curled back into a sneer. “Amos Diggory hired them.”

Lily’s widened. “No, he’s on the Board! Why would he—”

“Why would any father?” Alice asked carefully. “His son is dead by Tom Riddle and *your* son’s hand. He wants *revenge*.”

DIAGNOSIS

“I always nap on your couch and you just get on without me,” Harry sighed, finally shaking off all of his exhaustion. He yawned, stretching his arms over his head, his back cracking. Tom’s nose wrinkled at the sound and Harry grinned. “Does that bother you?”

“You’re a child,” Tom sighed.

“You *like* me,” Harry teased.

Tom rolled his eyes. “I don’t know why.”

Harry laughed and he grabbed at his bag, turning to look at the man over his shoulder. “My shift is over. I’m hungry. Get lunch with me?”

“I’ll treat you,” Tom decided. He reached for his cloak, whipping it around his shoulders and offering his arm to Harry. Harry laughed even louder, reaching to loop his arm through Tom’s. They walked out the door and Harry could imagine that they were dating again, like the whole mess with Bellatrix hadn’t happened, hadn’t cracked them in half.

“I’ll change fast. I don’t mind what we eat,” Harry said honestly. Tom nodded. He looked down at him, a strange looking entering his burgundy eyes. “What?”

“I miss your eggs.”

Harry’s eyes softened.

I miss you.

“Do you really?” Harry drawled.

Tom huffed out a small laugh. “Harry, would you—”

Harry hadn’t heard him. He looked around the empty hallway, searching for a nosey matron or even a patient’s family in the wrong place.

“It’s so deserted. Where is everyone? It’s barely four,” Harry muttered with a roll of his eyes. He turned to Tom, his lips quirked into a small smile. It faltered slightly when he saw the look in Tom’s eyes. Tom was still, his eyes darting everywhere over the hallway, his head tilted as if he were listening for something. “Tom, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Harry,” Tom said immediately. He paused, turning to him with a strange look. It was indecipherable, more so than usual. “Where’s your wand?”

“Oh, *damn*. This is what I get for falling asleep on your couch again,” Harry muttered under his breath. He turned on his heel, walking back to the office.

“I’ll call for the lift,” Tom said, slowly.

Harry raised his hand in acknowledgment and turned to walk back to the office. He was only a few steps down the hallway when the lift opened with a soft ring. Harry looked over his shoulder, and he felt his heart stop beating.

Tom held his wand out, pointing straight into the lift, and standing just at the doors was Amos Diggory, his wand held outstretched, the tip pressed right into Tom's chest.

“Tom!” Harry called, goosebumps running down his arms. “Tom!”

Amos looked up, wide-eyed and then his wand made a smooth arc and it was pointed at Harry. Harry who was fucking *wandless*.

“Love, it’s fine,” Tom insisted, without taking his eyes off Diggory. Amos was looking between Tom and down the hallway, at Harry, his wand swinging between the two of them. Tom went to reach for his wand, but Amos swung his own back to Harry and Tom. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Mr. Diggory.”

“Why not? An eye for an eye, yes?” Amos asked. His voice was hard, brooking no argument. He had burned through his grief, replacing it with an empty sort of anger that flooded his veins like ice. Harry tried to take a step forward, but Hermione hissed in his ear, pulling him back.

“Mr. Diggory, listen to me,” Tom said firmly. “I cannot pretend to know your loss. I have never had a child and lost him due to terrible circumstances outside of anyone’s control—”

“It *was* under your control. You were supposed to save him!” Amos shouted. His voice boomed, echoing off the metal of the lift, traveling down the dead, empty hallway. There was a moment of stillness and Tom looked more alert, more aware than ever that Amos’ wand was pointed right at Harry, that Harry, in *all* his stupidity, didn’t have his fucking *wand* on him.

“I know. I was supposed to save him, and I couldn’t,” Tom said softly. He took another step forward, his wand pointed directly at Amos. “Mr. Diggory, do you want to know why I became a Healer? Why I started this project?”

“No,” Amos barked. Harry tried to take another step backward. “DON’T YOU MOVE!”

Tom’s eyes narrowed and then went cold again. “Don’t do this, Mr. Diggory. Don’t threaten him. Don’t yell at him. He doesn’t have a wand. It’s in my office. He’s not a threat. Focus on me.”

“You’re *lying*,” Amos hissed.

“He’s not,” Harry said, his voice barely over a whisper. “We were going to lunch. I forgot my wand in his office. I doubled back to get it and he went to get the lift. Mr. Diggory—”

Amos turned away from him. "You killed my son," he accused his voice low.

“I have been confronted with death since the day I was born. My mother died giving birth to me. My father died, not wanting me,” Tom said firmly. He took a step forward. “Your son

isn’t the first person I’ve seen with Hearteater Virus. I started this project because I wanted to conquer it. When I first became a Healer, I wanted to be God. Now, I just want to save *lives*.”

“You didn’t save his,” Amos said, his voice cracking. He was watching Harry again. His wand was trembling.

Tom cleared his throat and he clenched his teeth. “Yes, but killing Harry...Harry, who is the most compassionate human being I have ever known, won’t bring him back,” Tom said softly. “So, Mr. Diggory, if you please, stop pointing your wand at me. Look at me.”

Harry’s teeth were clenched so tight that his brain hurt. Tom stepped to the side just enough to hide Harry from Amos’ sight, from where he was tucked back in the lift. Tom reached behind him with his free hand and flicked his arm. Harry stumbled back as quietly as possible. Arms wrapped around him, one hand slapping over his mouth. Harry tried to scream, but the hand was so tight, not a sound emerged.

"Be quiet, Harry," Hermione hissed in his ear, dragging him back. Her arms were as tight as steel bands, one wrapped around his head and the other around his middle. She began to drag him back even as Harry tried to dig his heels into the smooth ground.

Harry struggled, attempting to press forward, but Hermione gave no leeway.

"I am a flawed man, Mr. Diggory, unfortunately. We all are. We can try to be God. We can try to conquer Death, but Death is unchanging and unbendable. It will always come. We are not God," Tom said. Each word emerged like they hurt, rendered from his gut with rage and grief and fear. He didn't look at Harry anymore as Harry tried to jerk forward. "Mr. Diggory, I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

Harry couldn’t see into the lift anymore. He was too far down the hallway now as Hermione whispered panicked words into his ears. His cheek felt wet. He looked down at his hunter green robes, her hands were dark and covered in blood. He could smell the blood coating her skin, bright and iron and familiar.

“You can’t hurt me,” Amos said, softly.

Harry looked down. There were footsteps of blood, going backward. Hermione was soaked in *blood*. What had happened to her?

Harry stumbled back, a soft yelp emerging from Hermione’s mouth as he stomped hard on her foot. Tom held turned only a millimeter, eyes darting away for a half-second, his wand never wavering.

A half-second was all it took.

Harry felt the world slow around him.

For most people, a hospital was a scary, hostile place. It was a place where bad things happened. Most people preferred to be *anywhere* else. They would prefer anything to getting that owl, a message colored bright green like the robes that fully-realized Healers wore. But,

Harry had never been like most people. When his mother couldn't shuck him off on some unsuspecting godfather, or when James had been out of the country on a mission, Lily had sat him down in her office, and said '*Watch your sister*'.

And they'd roamed the halls instead. They had played in the pharmacy. Harry had learned how to use a quill, carefully copying his mother's case files and charts to learn penmanship. St. Mungo's had been his safe place. His sanctuary.

Sanctuaries were violated over much less.

The world picked up speed again. Tom was watching him with wide eyes, mouthing something to him: *Run.* Hermione was trying to pull him back.

"Mr. Diggory—" Tom began.

"*Kardiafors Khawardan.*"

Harry had never seen it in practice; no one ever had, not since the Unspeakables had made sure that it disappeared as perfectly as they did. It was a spell lost to time, manifesting in the most terrible of ways, later on. In truth, Harry hadn't ever seen it written anywhere before, not really. Only in three places, to be exact: an Unspeakable file, on the board in Tom's office, and a cramped scrawl in the margins of Harry's notes. The notes he'd given to Cedric to show his father.

The notes on the desk, opened to that very page.

The spell was not shocking or terrible. There wasn't any crackling magic, no colored bolts of lightning. It moved like all plagues did: deaf, and blind, and dumb.

Tom blinked once, slowly tilting his head as he took a deep breath, the curse falling over him.

And for a moment, Amos looked so very vindicated. A wild look up utter satisfaction contorted his face into something horrifying, for just a moment, and then, it gave way to despair. He reached out a shaking hand as Tom took a staggering step backward, his long fingers reaching for the wall to steady himself, his wand dropping from his other hand, rolling down the hallway with a clatter before coming to a stop.

Then, Tom collapsed, his arms and legs falling limp and he seized, his body jerking violently.

Hermione's hand was so tight over his mouth, no one could hear Harry's scream.

Chapter End Notes

Whoop, there it is. I've been planning that last scene since the very start. Here. We. GO!

Now, for all of y'all looking for the legend to jump out in Harry...just you wait and see, because our boy is about to become GREAT.

Hope you drop a comment while I'm on vacation. I'd love to come back to a sea of panic a la the scene in Community where Donald Glover returns with pizza to a room on fire.

SOURCES:

Hearteater Virus: themonsterblogofmonsters

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry's first thought was that he was having a nightmare.

There was no other explanation for the way that Tom had collapsed, limbs going stiff and then limp like a willow tree. There was no explanation for the creeping mist or the hand clamped tight around his mouth so that he had to swallow his own screams. There wasn't a way to explain the sudden feeling of his entire world ending in that one moment and the way his own heart had stopped beating in his ribcage.

Harry's second thought was *Fuck, we're going to die* because Amos Diggory was getting ready to step out of the lift and he would see Hermione and Harry.

Diggory's wand emerged first and then his wand. Harry jerked violently against Hermione's arms, but they were steel bands, yanking him back. There was no give.

But, just as Diggory almost stepped out of the lift, a great shout echoed from the staircase with the sound of feet pounding up the steps following. In quick succession, Diggory yanked his hand back but held the lift open, listening for any sudden moves.

Harry practically heard Hermione's decision before she made it. With one flick of her wand, she summoned yellow birds and then she swung her whole arm forward and the tiny birds attacking, shooting as fast as tiny Snitches. Diggory roared in pain and irritation but it gave Hermione the distraction she needed. She flicked her wand, opening a door and shoved Harry inside. Just as she shut the door, Harry heard the lift door closing and there was quiet again.

But, Hermione threw the door shut, barricading with every locking spell she knew and her own body.

"Fuck," she whispered. Then, with more emphasis, "*Fuck!*"

Harry balanced himself on the bed, fingers knitting into the sheets. He felt it give under his clenched fists like tissue paper.

"Let me out," he whispered, shaking. Every time Harry blinked, he could see Tom's crumpled body. The image was seared into the flesh of his eyelids.

Harry still felt like he was screaming but no one could hear.

Hermione hadn't heard him. "We have to get out of here. Matron downstairs, dying. We have to find Ron, Harry. I need...I need Ron," she said, practically stammering. She was pacing now, fingers twitching like she needed a cigarette. "And Neville! We have to find him too."

Stronger, Harry repeated, "Let me out."

Hermione jerked, eyes wide.

“I...what?” Hermione asked. “Are you mad? We need a plan.”

“I’ve got one. Let me out. Tom,” Harry said and then he shook his head. Hermione stared at him through narrowed eyes.

“Riddle is down, Harry. He might be—”

Harry snapped.

“Tom is still alive!” Harry shrieked. Hermione shook her head, trying to hush him. “I’m going, Hermione.”

“We could be *killed*,” Hermione hissed frantically. Harry tried to dart past her, but Hermione moved too fast, grabbing his face in her hands. She pulled his forehead to hers. “No, no, no, no. You’re not going *anywhere*. We stay *put*.”

“Hermione, I love him. *Please*,” Harry shouted, his eyes stinging with tears.

Hermione’s face hardened and she shook her head. “You want to go out there? You go through *me*.”

Harry stepped back, pulling away. Hermione relaxed against the door as if she'd won, and she sagged as all of the excess adrenaline drained out of her. She put a hand to her head. Harry looked at her for a long moment and then lunged forward, grabbing Hermione by her shoulders. He shoved her to the side and threw the door open, tumbling into the hallway.

He looked around, wild-eyed and then he saw him.

Tom was still crumpled in a heap, his body moving slowly with his breath. He was a few meters from where he'd landed as if he tried to crawl forward towards his wand and couldn't muster the strength anymore. Harry ran forward and slid on his knees, grabbing Tom's wand. He pointed it at the lift doors, biting his lower lip and when the lift didn't budge, Harry turned around.

Just as he did, he heard the steps that Diggory had and the doors to the stairs were thrown open.

“STOP!” Harry shouted, his voice booming through the hallway. He threw himself in front of Tom’s body, his eyes narrowed on the pair and recognition came over him slowly.

Ron and Malfoy spun around, both of their wands held outstretched. Harry stared at them for a long moment and then a heart-wrenching sob ripped its way from his throat. Fat tears rolled down his cheeks, gathering at the top of his chin. He sobbed, loud and ugly, his shoulders trembling but his wand never wavered, still pointed at the pair.

Ron fell to his knees and walked forward on them, hand held out.

“Harry...Harry,” he whispered.

“He...he...he cursed Tom!” Harry sobbed.

“*Mon dieu,*” Malfoy rasped, one hand pressed to his chest, right over his fast beating heart.

Ron slid forward just a little more, reaching out to grab Harry’s shoulder, steadying him.

“Harry...where’s Hermione?” Ron asked.

Harry opened his mouth but nothing emerged.

The door down the hall flew open and Harry spun around, wand at the ready.

“Ron? Ron!” Hermione shouted, running down the hall.

For the first time, Harry got a good look at her.

Hermione was soaked in blood from the crown of her head to the rubber soles of her trainers. Blood splattered her cheeks and was dried on her palms, caked in the lines. The hunter green look nearly black in her certain spots. Harry gaped but Ron launched himself towards her, throwing his arms around her.

“God, Hermione. I thought you were…” Ron trailed off, his voice cracking. He buried his nose in her wild curls.

“Ron…” Hermione rasped, clinging to him. She pulled back, fingers knotted in the black lapels of his robes. “It was Amos Diggory. He did this. He hurt the matron. He cursed…”

Hermione trailed off, looking over her shoulder to Harry.

“‘E cursed Riddle,” Malfoy finished, his accent so thick with anxiety, he sounded drunk.

Harry swallowed the grief and his screams. He let coldness settle in its place. Carefully, he swiped the back of his hands over his eyes and pushed Tom onto his back. The man’s face was slack, his mouth gently open. His eyes were closed but Harry could track movement under his eyelids.

“He’s not dead,” Harry said quietly.

There was a long moment of silence.

“I’ve never heard of that curse, Harry…” Hermione began gently. “Are you—”

“Yes, I’m sure. Summon Matron Miriam Strout,” Harry commanded. He turned to Malfoy. “Get me a gurney for him. Ron, help me get Tom down to the operating theatre.”

Malfoy hadn’t hesitated, darting into one of the empty hospital rooms to retrieve the floating bed.

Ron’s eyes widened. “Wait. What?”

“He’ll need an internal procedure. I don’t...know which one yet,” Harry muttered under his breath. He looked up at his terrified housemates.

“What is it, Harry? What’s wrong with him?” Hermione whispered. Even as she asked, she raised her wand, pulling it through the air and whispering the matron’s name, weaving the complicated Summoning Spell.

Malfoy emerged with the floating slab, ready for transport. Harry swallowed.

And quite grimly, Harry said, “It’s called the Hearteater Curse. It’s what Cedric Diggory died of.”

There was another moment of terrible silence.

“But that’s…” Ron trailed off.

“It’s not anything until I see it so let’s move,” Harry snapped. He clenched Tom’s wand tighter, so tight his knuckles went white. “Wands at the ready.”

Hermione trembled but took a step forward, raising her own wand. Harry waved his wand and slowly, Tom’s body rose into the air, all of his limbs limp. Harry settled him haphazardly onto the floating slab and they began their way down the staircase, alert and silent.

“What if ‘e iz down zere?” Malfoy whispered.

Ron hushed him silently and Hermione flinched at the suggestion. Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“He better not be. For his sake,” Harry hissed.

His body vibrates with anticipation and fury and fear. So much fear. He glanced over his shoulder. Tom was breathing shallowly, his chest barely rising. Harry turned back around and continued down the steps.

They moved with a steadiness that Harry hadn’t known they were capable of, and they moved as one. For each shifting body, another person’s wand came up. For each breath or step they didn’t recognize, they were alert, a curse close to dripping from their tongues. All of them were focused on the preservation of their patient, Tom Riddle, the love of Harry’s life.

When they emerged on the theatre floor, they were near silent except for Hermione’s heavy breathing. Her eyes darted back and forth, her wand outstretched, waiting to curse the nearest foe that could potentially leap around the corner. Harry stared onward, gaze caught on the very theatre that he had been too afraid to step into since they had lost Cedric.

He wouldn’t lose Tom in that theatre too.

“This one,” Harry mouthed. Malfoy nodded, and carefully guided his side of Tom’s floating slab towards the doors. Ron held up his wand, looking behind him. He moved to go first, but Hermione grabbed him, yanking him back.

“Wait,” she hissed violently. Carefully, she took a step forward. “*Homenum Revelio*.”

Something swooped through the air, and there was a faint glowing in the seams of the double doors.

“Someone’s in there,” Ron murmured. He looked at Hermione. “Good thinking.”

“Someone has to have it,” Hermione said, but it was missing any of her characteristic callous humor, replaced by a shaky fear that fit wrong on her.

“Iz it ‘im?” Malfoy muttered. He was paler than usual.

“We’re about to find out,” Harry said firmly. “Malfoy, protect Tom. Ron, cover me.”

“Harry, no—” Hermione started.

But, Harry spun into action, flicking his wand and sending the doors flying open.

“*Stup—*”

“*Protego!*”

Harry’s eyes widened at the figure that stood in the center of the room, back straight. Miriam Strout stared back at him, unimpressed and looking as if she’d just been woken up from a very long nap, but otherwise unharmed.

“Healer Potter, what is—” Miriam Strout started. She paused when she saw the floating slab just behind Harry. She cleared her throat, taken aback. “Ah. I see.”

“Do you?” Harry asked. “Can you...I don’t know what to do.”

His expression crumpled suddenly, all of his adrenaline draining away now that he was in the presence of someone Tom trusted implicitly to have his back. Strout took a step forward as Harry took a staggering step forward, but Harry steadied himself before he could fall.

“Oh, Healer...Harry,” Strout corrected.

"He was hit with the Hearteater Curse. I don't...I don't...he's hurting. It's not like the Virus. It's not slow acting. The Curse isn't supposed to be slow acting. He's going to die. I can't…" Harry whispered because he could.

He could live without Tom. That was the thing.

But, he didn't want to. Not if he didn't have to, and he didn't think he did.

“You know about zis curse?” Malfoy asked suddenly. “Intimately?”

Harry looked up at him, wild-eyed and terrified. “Well...yes.”

“Zen, Tom Riddle won’t be dying today. Will ‘e?” Malfoy asked carefully.

Ron’s nostrils flared. Harry leaned back, all of the breath leaving his chest. The beating of his heart was loud in his own ears, and he could taste his pulse racing.

"We don't have a Healer. What are we going to do?" Ron said, his hand clenched tightly in Hermione's. He didn't seem to mind all of the tacky, drying blood.

Malfoy was staring at Harry with a strange glow in his grey eyes. Strout's lips pulled into a grim smile.

"We have a 'ealer," he said, his accent thickening from the stress.

"Who's going to open him up? *How* do we open him up?" Ron rasped. "Who's going to fix him?"

Malfoy was still watching Harry as if he knew his very insides. It was then that Harry remembered three Healers watching from the gallery as he and Tom did their internal procedure on the Yaa Sang. Malfoy had seen his work. Malfoy was *demanding* something from him: greatness.

Harry cleared his throat. "I am. I'm going to do it."

DIAGNOSIS

Amos felt like he should be crying—out of relief or something else, he wasn't sure yet. But, the operative words were 'should be', because he wasn't. His eyes were suspiciously dry, and the air was terribly still. His world had shrunk down to the size of the lift he was in. He wasn't sure which floor he'd pressed, only that he had heard footsteps and shouting in the stairwell and had flung himself back into the lift.

Amos cursed his stupidity. Potter had escaped. Potter had *seen* him. Potter might be able to *fix* him. But, no. He couldn't, Amos reassured himself. They couldn't fix his Cedric, and Potter had seemed so *sincere* in his efforts. Except, if he had been truly sincere, he would've saved Cedric, wouldn't he? Amos wasn't sure.

Amos didn't know much of anything anymore. He only rode the lift up and down, mindlessly pressing buttons to avoid being caught. He'd gone up thrice and down once. He'd ventured out onto the Artefact Accidents floor out of pure curiosity. He'd never been there. No one really spoke of the specialty with much respect. He'd tried the doors.

They were all locked, so he'd kept going.

No one had come for him. Amos thought someone would. Someone must have come across the matron in the pharmacy. At the reminder, he felt his stomach turn.

There had been so much blood. He hadn't meant to do it. He hadn't meant for there to be *so* much *blood*.

Except, his lizard brain hissed, *you did*.

“I didn’t,” Amos said firmly. He sounded like he was shouting in the cold box of the lift.

Spell Damage, droned the cold, pleasant voice.

The lift doors gave a soft ding as they slid open.

He was back again.

For some strange reason, Amos expected Riddle’s body to still be there. It wasn’t.

There was no one. He didn’t feel much loss. Harry Potter wouldn’t be able to save his poor damned love, anyway.

Amos just kept walking. He heard nothing. He saw nothing. He had nothing.

He was nothing.

Amos Diggory was not a husband. He was not a father. He had no family, and he had no friends. If he didn’t have any of those things—if he wasn’t any of those things—what was he?

He blinked when he realized where he was.

For a moment, a single one, he was terribly, terribly afraid. *Would he still be there, in that bed?*

Amos Diggory hadn’t seen his son yet. He didn’t have a body to bury yet. He pressed the door open and paused when he saw what was inside.

Albus Dumbledore sat in the seat that Amos had always occupied, and there, in the bed, was Cedric’s body. Amos still felt like he should be crying. He still couldn’t quite manage it. Albus hadn’t looked up from where he was sitting, his eyes devoid of any panic. It reminded him of Riddle, strangely enough. Riddle had looked him in the eye without any panic or fear, staring at him with eyes that said that he knew what Amos had come to do and didn’t quite mind it, as long as Amos didn’t go for Potter.

When Amos had a move to, he had seen the fury burning through Riddle and had no doubt that the man would've killed him where he stood, and could've managed it with ease. It had only been because of Potter that Amos had managed to do it. He hadn't known if the spell would work, but the incantation had been burned into Amos' mind, into his retina. Every time he blinked, he saw it there.

Every time he breathed, he thought he heard Potter’s muffled scream in his ear.

“I’ve been looking for you, Amos,” Albus said suddenly, turning his gaze from Cedric’s waxy face to Amos’. His eyes held all the fury and disappointment of the world, a flat blue that promised steel and retribution.

"I've been looking for you," Amos said, suddenly. He found that he wasn't lying. Albus reached for his wand and waved it, Conjuring a chair on the opposite of Cedric. Amos slowly

went to sit down and forced himself to look at Cedric. "It doesn't look like him, you know."

“Ah?”

“Cedric is...*was* full of life. Even through his pain, he smiled. He was kind and gentle and generous. He was a good boy, and this...this doesn’t look like him. This looks like a doll,” Amos said firmly. He tore his gaze away and looked up at Albus. “I didn’t decide to do this until three days ago. Three days to decide to kill two people. And I didn’t really decide until the moment that I...did it.”

He ended, lamely, unsure of himself.

“You killed two people. Tom, then? And Harry?” Albus asked. He sounded so *disappointed*.

Amos cringed, looking away. “Not Potter. But, a matron...she reminded me of *him*—Riddle. A snob with no regard for the people they’re supposed to treat with care. No compassion.”

“An overworked matron who was probably at the end of her rope,” Albus corrected. Amos didn’t look up. “And Tom?”

“He killed my son,” Amos snarled, furious. He couldn’t look at the body. He couldn’t.

Albus sighed. “Your son suffered from a *terrible* illness, one that had no cure. Tom—”

“Didn’t try hard enough.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that he tried his very best, and found himself severely lacking when it wasn’t enough,” Albus finished as if he hadn’t heard Amos’ scathing words. He seemed to anticipate Amos’ next words for he continued on, “And I know a thing or two about grief, Amos, as does Tom. You either overcome it and let it eat you alive, turn you into something dark and twisted.”

Amos shivered. “It hurts,” he said quietly.

And with all the sincerity in the world, Albus leaned over and said, quietly, “I *know*.”

Amos thought he did. He *knew* Albus knew because that look in his eyes now—clear and blue and terribly, terribly sad—was the look that Amos saw in the mirror almost every day.

His protests tasted like ash now.

“I wanted to kill him,” Amos said quietly. “I wanted Riddle dead for his crimes.”

“And now you’ve three victims,” Albus said sharply, unforgiving.

Amos looked up wide-eyed. “What? I do not—”

"Now, Harry Potter will live with the exact same grief, the exact same pain that you do. Every day, he will think about the man he loved and think about how he was robbed of the life that he should have had, the life he deserved. You've done that boy a great disservice.

That boy—that Healer—who did *everything* he could to save your son," Albus said severely. "And even if you can't believe that of Tom, you cannot deny that of Harry Potter."

Amos faltered, because Harry Potter had befriended his son, had spoken with him, had been his constant companion whenever he was in pain. When Cedric had died, Harry had looked devastated, had looked at his hands as if wondering, *How could you betray me?* He had looked at Amos like he understood all of his pain and felt it too.

Now, he would.

"I didn't—"

"The Aurors are here, Amos," Albus said coolly.

Amos jerked and raised his wand but Albus still didn't react, only staring at him with a frown.

"But, my—"

"The Longbottoms were in the hospital. A former Auror, a current Auror, and a hitwizard. Your hired enforcers were dreadfully underprepared for their brand of..*justice*," Albus said as if he found the way the Longbottoms had dispatched the enforcers slightly distasteful. He shook it off, continuing on. "The Aurors are positioned along this corridor under Disillusionment Charms, waiting for my signal. You will submit yourself to custody, Amos."

"But, I—"

"You will pay recompense for your crimes. This is *my* hospital. You cannot come into my hospital and threaten my people," Albus said firmly. With a flick of his wand, the door swung open. Amos looked up at the three Aurors that stood in the doorway, all with wands out pointed at him. Amos pointed his wand at Albus and then his wrist went slack.

Amos let out a soft sigh. His eyes stung. "This is the first time that I've seen my son since he died."

The Aurors crowded into the room. Amos recognized the first—Sirius Black. There wasn't a single hint of humor in his flat grey eyes. It was all business. Flanking him was a tall, broad-shoulders black man with a smoothly shaven head and a gold hoop dangling from one ear. Finally, there was a young woman who couldn't haven't been much older than Cedric. She was peaky looking, and not quite pretty with short neon pink spikes of hair.

The young woman scooted around Black, approaching him with wide eyes. She never relaxed her wand.

"Mr. Diggory," she said softly. "I am sorry for your loss."

Amos dropped his wand. It fell to the floor with a clatter. Slowly, he turned to look at Cedric's face again.

And finally, a man began to cry.

Harry took a single breath to ground himself. Then, he began.

“Matron Strout, there is a comatose body in the room adjacent to Cedric Diggory’s old room. Please bring it down here,” Harry said firmly. Malfoy and Ron jerked at his words but if Matron Strout was affected, she didn’t show it.

The older woman simply nodded and took off at a brisk pace, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

“A body, Harry? What are you—” Ron asked but Harry was lost in his own thoughts.

“Someone needs to go to Tom’s office. It’s open still. I need the board and the open file on his desk. And I need as much Blood Replenishing Potion as I can get,” Harry instructed. He slowly turned to look at Malfoy and Ron meaningfully.

Malfoy stepped up first. “I’ll get the board and file.”

Malfoy darted from the room with more courage than Harry had ever expected out of him. But, Harry was too focused; he’d muster up the ability to feel grateful later. Now, he just felt a grim satisfaction that his orders were being followed. He turned to Ron, an expectant look on his face. Ron was watching Hermione who was standing in the corner, her blood tacky hands pressed to her face as she tried to breathe.

"Go. I've got her. I need you to do this for me. If this was Hermione—" Harry said firmly. He cut himself off because if this had been Hermione, he'd be dying too. He wouldn't be able to move. Now, he moved with an efficiency that he'd never known he possessed.

“Blood Replenishing Potion. Generic?” Ron asked.

"Yes. No antibodies, no foreign cells. Clear out the entire pharmacy," Harry said without regret. Nothing else mattered at that moment. Blood-Replenishing Potion could always be manufactured again. Tom couldn't. Tom and all his genius. Tom and all his damage and love.

Harry hadn’t looked at Tom again.

“I’m on it,” Ron said firmly.

Love. Darling. Sweetheart.

Then, it was only Harry and Hermione and Tom. Harry would deal with Hermione first. He walked up to her slowly, keeping his breath even. Hermione didn’t flinch away from him as he reached out and grabbed her wrists, slowly peeling her hands from her face. She looked up at him with terror eyes and swallowed hard.

“Harry…” she whispered.

Harry reached into her robes, never taking her eyes away from his and felt around for the carton. When he found it, he slowly pulled it out and flicked up the lid. Hermione blinked as he pressed the cigarette between her lips and unceremoniously lit the end.

“You get one cigarette, Hermione. Then I need you present. Can you be?” Harry asked.

Hermione lifted a sticky hand and took a long drag, blowing it away from both Tom and Harry. Harry appreciated it.

"Present," she whispered as if it were a foreign word.

“Yes. Present. Because if I can’t do this, I need you to be able to tell me that I can and have to. You can’t let me stop. It can take hours and you have to tell me to *keep. Going*,” Harry said firmly.

Hermione swallowed. “I don’t know what’s happening.”

“It’s called the *Vol de Mort* project,” Harry said quietly. “The ‘flight from death’ project. It was his idea. The idea that magic could be used to conquer Death. But a very particular kind of magic: *Dark* magic.”

Hermione winced. She took another long drag as her panic build and exhaled it all with the smoke. “There’s no such thing. Dark magic is the antithesis of Healing,” she said, her tone broking no argument.

“That’s not what he thought. And Tom is a genius. We’ve done Dark things, Hermione. I’ve read so many Dark things. And now, I will look at our notes and I will an idea out of a haystack of nothing and attempt to use it to essentially resurrect my dying lover. You need to tell me I can do it,” Harry said quietly. “Because...I’m not him. He’s brilliant, Hermione. He knows all of these things...and I know what he told me.”

Hermione was quiet for too long. She wasn’t looking at Harry anymore. Instead, her gaze was trained on Tom as she smoked her cigarette until it was a nub. Harry was still too afraid to turn around. He thought if he looked at Tom’s broken body, he would crumble into nothingness. He felt like he was crumbling, bits of him falling away.

“This curse,” Hermione began. She stopped.

“It’s the predecessor of the Hearteater Virus,” Harry finished.

Hermione nodded. “So, how is this different? The Hearteater Virus is exactly that. A virus.”

“Yes, but this is the same thing,” Harry said firmly. “Cedric died. Tom can’t—”

Hermione shook her head. She was still staring far away. “No. It’s not and it is. The symptoms are the same. Maybe the problem was that you were treating the Virus as a virus because of it’s name. But, you should’ve been treating it for what it is—spell damage,” Hermione looked at him with sharp eyes. “And Harry…you’re *brilliant* at spell damage.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something but the doors burst again. In a second, Hermione had the rest of her cigarette crushed on the floor and Harry was thrown behind her. Hermione's wand was up and she only relaxed when she registered Matron Strout and Malfoy standing at attention with their loots. Matron Strout ignored Hermione's pointed wand as she guided in the slab.

The comatose wizard's name was Barnabus Burke Jr. He was a relatively young man—just turned 30, but he still appeared 23, the age he was when he'd fallen into a coma after a very unfortunate run-in at his father's store in Knockturn Alley. The elder Burke had been apprehended for his possession of Dark objects, but Barnabus—who had not wanted to follow in his father's footsteps—had been in training to be an Unspeakable. In his will, he had left his remains to the study of the Department of Mysteries. And now, here he was, to be offered to Harry.

Not that Harry knew what he was going to do with him.

Malfoy slipped from behind Matron Strout.

"Where's the board?" Harry barked as Malfoy passed him the file. Harry slapped it down on the side table and began flipping through it.

"*Engorgio*," Malfoy said, and the board grew larger before their eyes, filling the space. Harry spun around, slowly sliding the board to the side. "I had to shrink it. I could not move fast enough."

The door burst open again and everyone turned and Ron gasped, loudly. His feet were sticking but over both arms were baskets of large vials all rattling.

"I got...I got...forty. Cleared it out," he gasped, out of breath. He paused, swallowing to look over at Hermione. "There's...there's a lot of blood."

"I know," Hermione said quietly. "Is she...is the matron…"

"No. She wasn't there. Someone must have found her," Ron said firmly.

Hermione looked away and carefully Banished the remains of her cigarette. Harry looked at her.

"Can you...keep everyone out," he commanded. She looked grateful at being given something to do. Hermione liked to be kept busy.

Hermione hurriedly locked the doors, throwing up every possible charm that she kept in her head, which was no small amount.

Harry turned his attention to the work at hand.

Tom's notes were orderly but all about Cedric and mostly about the Hearteater Virus. It was all about treating the Hearteater Virus like a disease. But, Hermione's comment about spell damage stuck with Harry. If it was spell damage, that required a different approach. Not so

much about transformative Healing then. No, it was about a countercurse, almost. But, there weren't any known countercurses for the Hearteater Virus.

Harry looked at their treatment plan and the tiny slip of paper clipped to the top of it.

The steps of Cedric's failed treatment and the results of the Cor Cordis were plain as day. It didn't hurt so much when something mattered now. Tom's words floated back to him. All of it came back to him, all of Harry's failures and successes. This was the moment.

All of the other moments had been the moment too.

But, this. *This*.

The list, perfectly written in Tom's careful print.

Approved: *Transformative Healing, Phys Mods (modifying the heart through potions?), Fiendfyre (pull teeth, cauterize?)*

The options were few, though Harry saw that there was research on each. And yet.

None of it was enough. All of it required time, time that Harry didn't have. All of it required perfect planning, and this wasn't a time for Tom's painstaking planning or his attention to detail. This was Harry, and Harry wasn't a planner. He wasn't incredibly clever or know a vast amount of knowledge. This couldn't be it.

Then, Harry looked at the maybe list.

There was only a single suggestion. They'd never looked much into the more experimental treatment plans. At least, Harry hadn't. Dark magic had never sat very well with him. He wasn't sure if it was because he'd been raised by Aurors or because Dark magic was against all laws of Healing. And yet.

And yet.

Homunculus—>Inferi, was scrawled there in Tom's hand, a strange little question mark next to the word. *See lit review, appendix A.*

Harry remembered his brief conversation with Lily about Frankenstein. About necromancy. About flesh and Darkness and all in between.

Harry flipped through the pages, making sure to keep all in order. Every single paper could be important. He stopped suddenly when he came to Tom's research and in the margin, the words: *dark but plausible,* were written in dark green ink. Harry scanned it, committing all of the information to memory. But still, it wasn't enough. It couldn't be. Incantations and information weren't enough.

Where Tom was a genius, knowing anything about everything, Harry hadn't been gifted with that. No, Harry's talents rested in his instincts; at least, that's what everyone said.

But, Harry preferred to think of it in another way: imagination.

Slowly, the idea formulated. The arteries had to be reattached. But, not with something ordinary. Flesh and thread wasn't a magical conductor. Flesh and thread wouldn't be protected from the raw Dark magic that was about to occur. No. But there were other things that could protect. Even reverse the damage of Dark magic.

Harry slowly looked up from the papers. He looked over at Hermione, tucked against the corner of the wall, using it to steady herself.

"Hermione. Is there any more unicorn hair?" Harry asked carefully. Hermione didn't say anything, her eyes trained on Tom's unmoving body. Her fist tightened in Ron's sleeve. "Hermione!"

Slowly, she turned to him. "Yes. In Emmeline's office."

"Are you capable of fetching the unicorn hair and a suture kit?" Harry asked, not unkindly but firm.

Ron opened his mouth to protest but Hermione pushed herself off the wall.

"Yes," she said.

"Okay. Please do that," Harry said. He threw back his shoulders and cracked his knuckles. Briefly, he wondered if he should send for his own wand but then, there was something so right about it being Tom's wand that accomplished the impossible. But, Harry did have a final request. "And can someone find me a radio? Stat!"

DIAGNOSIS

The few patients and matrons that remained in E&T were blessedly and cursedly silent. Blessedly, because that meant that no one had to know that there was someone in there, and every fifteen or so minutes, Rodolphus would allow someone to exit out the back way. They were down to two patients a few matrons and Healers. It was cursed because the fewer people in the room, the more Bellatrix could hear her own shallow breathing.

"C-can we go now? Is it safe?" the patient's mother asked. She hadn't asked for this either; her son had had an unfortunate bout of accidental magic, seeing as he was only nine. He had gotten angry about some toy that his older brother had climbed into a tree with. The older brother had suffered a fractured ankle.

A Healer had mended it neatly and immediately. Bellatrix had just signed their discharge papers.

And now, they were stuck.

"We don't know yet," Rodolphus repeated for the thousandth time but still with his infinite amount of patience. Bellatrix ground her teeth together, shaking. Rodolphus turned back to

her and cupped her face in his hands. She couldn't even find it in herself to protest. "And you? How are you?"

"Not. Fine," Bellatrix said between clenched teeth.

"He's okay," Rodolphus whispered to her. "He *is*."

He repeated it as if to will it into existence, and Bellatrix wanted to believe him desperately. And yet, she knew deep down in the pit of her that it wasn't.

"What if we die?" Bellatrix asked blankly, quietly so as not to alarm the remaining patients.

"I will love you until my dying day," Rodolphus said immediately.

Bellatrix closed her eyes. "Rodolphus, I—" she whispered, her voice cracking.

And Rodolphus smiled. "Oh, sweetheart, Bella donna, I know. I've always known."

Bellatrix sighed to herself, shaking her head. "I'm ready to go out there and find him and *kill* whoever thought that they could hurt him. I'm only sitting here because I don't want to go to Azkaban. I'm not afraid," Bellatrix spat. "I'm *angry.*"

Rodolphus clenched his teeth.

"And you don't think I am? I would *kill* for him," Rodolphus promised back.

They sat in silence, reveling in their shared confession for just a moment before a great silvery dog stormed through the doors. Bellatrix jumped up, recognizing it immediately. The dog opened its mouth, and said, *Open the doors.*

Bellatrix stalked forward, whipping her wand around her as she began to dismantle both her and Rodolphus' locking charms and wards.

"What are you doing?" asked another male patient, alarmed. He had his wand out, but his hand was shaking.

"It's the Aurors," Rodolphus said calmly.

As soon as Bellatrix pulled down the last spell, the doors burst open. Sirius walked inside, shoulders thrown back and eyes tired. Rodolphus swallowed his relief, waiting eagerly for the man's words. He was flanked by Shacklebolt, and Bellatrix's niece, Tonks, but Potter was nowhere to be found. Probably with the suspect, then.

"Well?" the mother asked impatiently.

Sirius blinked as if just remembering where he was.

"The hospital has been secured. You're free to go," Sirius said as he paraded through the E&T area. The mother let out a sob of relief and grabbed her two sons without a single look

backward. As the remaining patients left through the backdoor, Sirius relaxed somewhat, though there was still a deep furrow between his brows.

“So...what happened? Is Tom okay?” Rodolphus asked, looking over at Sirius, when he realized that Bellatrix wasn’t going to ask, let alone look at her cousin.

Sirius frowned for a long moment. He turned his gaze to Bellatrix. She was staring at the floor, whispering to herself, before she looked up so suddenly that Sirius jumped. She stared at him with wide, dark, hooded eyes and jumped up from her seat, taking a staggering step towards him.

“You’re hesitating,” she said, voice sharp. “Tom isn’t...he *can’t* be.”

She said it with such conviction that Sirius looked like he nearly believed her.

“He’s not,” Rodolphus said, laughing too loud and too incredulous. “It’s...it’s *Tom*. He knows how to handle himself.”

Sirius swallowed. “Amos...Diggory threatened Harry. Riddle…he’s being operated on, right now.”

Harry *freaking* Potter.

Bellatrix took off at a run, slamming through the gathered squad without a second glance backward. She knew that Rodolphus was right on her heels, so she didn't slow down for him. Her blood was rushing in her ears and all she could think was that Tom was so *stupid*. Of course, Tom had let himself get distracted. Harry freaking Potter was being threatened, and he probably just sacrificed himself to the wolves. He'd never been so fucking *stupid*.

Bellatrix nearly flew onto the gallery floor and she gaped at the crowd outside of the farthest gallery door. Astoria Greengrass was snarling in French, her wand raised and Neville Longbottom was just next to her, showing far more sternness than Bellatrix ever thought him capable of. Bellatrix shuddered as she swayed on the spot, unable to move.

Rodolphus nearly crashed into her back.

"Bella. Bella, come on," Rodolphus said firmly. He laced his fingers with hers and tugged her forward. Bellatrix stumbled forward and she cut through the crowd, ruthlessly shoving people out of her way. They nearly snapped at her but fell silent when they saw who she was.

Greengrass’ eyes widened.

“Mediwizard Black, Mediwizard Lestrange,” Greengrass said carefully. She looked over at Longbottom, but he only looked sad.

“Right this way, Mediwizards,” Longbottom said, stepping aside. He turned away from them to the rest of the crowd. “Single file line! Healer Dumbledore said trainees first and then, the rest at my discretion. *My* discretion.”

Greengrass looked like she was ready to protest before she stepped aside as well, nodding at both Bellatrix and Rodolphus. When Bellatrix and Rodolphus slipped inside, they saw the gallery was already moderately full. Lining the walls were the other department heads, Healer McGonagall, and Head Healer Dumbledore. Albus had a severe expression on his face, so different from the jovial gleam in his electric blue eyes that Bellatrix was used to. Healer McGonagall looked grimmer, the stern set of her mouth turned down into an ugly, twisted grimace.

“What is he doing? What is he doing?” Emmeline Vance chanted to herself. She looked more nervous than any of the rest of them.

Bellatrix swallowed hard, turning towards the gallery glass. A few trainees were gathered to the left, watching. Rodolphus just behind Bellatrix. When she first looked down, she wasn’t sure what she was seeing.

A terrible sound erupted from her lips and she took a staggering step back. Rodolphus’ arm looped around, holding her upright, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

“Oh...Tom,” Rodolphus whispered.

Harry freaking Potter stood between two bodies, and he was carving open the chest of the anonymous man. Just next to him was Tom. Potter was carefully not watching Tom, eyes trained on the chest he was cracking. Draco, Weasley, and a matron stood at attention, ready to help at any time. Granger stood in the corner, eyes flicking from the gallery to the door every few seconds, looking more lost by the moment. And Bellatrix looked at Tom, really looked at him; his slack mouth, his pain-furrowed brow, and his exposed chest.

Bellatrix let out a quiet sob. *Tom.*

DIAGNOSIS

They came into the atrium from the lifts. As Lily peeled through the thick spidery webs that had been laid onto the wardstone, disrupting the Apparation Zone, James sailed through the lobby as fast as he could, Lavender and a few other Aurors on his heels. James nearly collapsed as his leg throbbed, and he leaned heavily on his cane. His heart only stopped racing when he had Lily in his sights.

She hadn’t noticed him yet, still bent over the wide limestone statue that was thought to be just a beautiful characteristic of the lobby, but had really been the cleverly disguised wardstone that had allowed St. Mungo’s to operate without the Muggles seeing it for what it was, and allowing access to witches and wizards everywhere.

“Lily!” James shouted.

Lily looked up, and James' heart cracked when Lily's expression crumpled and her emotions spread from her bright green eyes into the lines of her face. She looked terrified and angry and hurt, all at once, and she ran at him, abandoning her task to throw her arms around James' neck.

"James," she gasped into his neck, and he could feel the relief in every line of her body. She pulled back a half-second later, eyes looking around wildly. "Lavender! Lavender, are you alright?"

She reached for Lavender, yanking her tight into their embrace, burying her face in the short blonde curls.

"I'm fine, Mum!" Lavender crowed, her voice muffled from the flesh and heat of her parents. "Sirius got him. He got Diggory with Kingsley and Tonks."

"Did he really? Albus went to find him. I told him not to—" Lily said.

"He's fine. Everything's fine. Almost fine," James amended.

Lily's expression crackled again. "Where's Harry? Where's my son?" she demanded, voice harsh. She looked around as if she expected to see him, her eyes growing wider when she didn't. "They said...did he touch him? I'll *kill* him."

Her voice lowered into a guttural growl. James had no doubt that she could and would kill Amos Diggory for laying a hand on her child. Lily had spent decades learning how to put a man back together. He had no doubt that she could reverse that knowledge quite cleanly and tear a man apart.

"No. He's fine," James said quietly. "But...just come on."

"Mum, it's insane. You have to see," Lavender said, finally pulling out of her parents' embrace. Both she and her father's limps seemed more severe after the brief stint of running they had just done, but Lily only Conjured a second cane for Lavender—a little too dark to be her customary purple. Lavender looked at her with a grateful smile and the trio rushed down the steps as the other Aurors began assembling order out of chaos.

Lily spotted her student first as they clambered down the stairs, pushing past rushing Aurors and matrons and Healers. Astoria was standing at the entrance of a gallery with Neville Longbottom, both of their wands held aloft. A surge of matrons and Healers alike tried to push forward but Astoria was shouting.

"*Non!* There iz no more space! *Non!*" Astoria snarled. Her eyes widened when she caught sight of her teacher and she raised her hand. "*Guérisseur*, you're here. Could we get a little…"

"Everyone move! Healer Lily Evans and Head Auror James Potter coming through!" Lily barked, her voice carrying over the din. Almost immediately, the Healers and matrons snapped to attention, all turning to look at the three-quarters finished family.

“And Lavender Brown-Potter,” Lavender squeaked. James snorted, rolling his eyes.

Lily slid through the crowd, James and Lavender on her heels. She looked between Neville and Astoria.

“What’s going on?” Lily asked in a hushed whisper.

“Harry’s operating. The gallery’s nearly packed. Healer McGonagall said not to let anyone else in. We’re waiting on the Aurors to get down here and organized them. We need this blocked off,” Neville said firmly.

James’ eyes widened. “Why?”

“Is this...he’s *operating*? On *who*?” Lily demanded.

Neville was pale, and he shook his head. “I can’t say. It’s...Harry specifically said that the patient he’s operating on is now part of the Vol de Mort project. That’s top secret. I can’t say anything,” Neville said.

“Oh…” Lily whispered, almost shaking. She looked more unhinged than she had only moments before.

"I'll get this area sectioned off," James said firmly. He raised his wand. "*Expecto Patronum. Dissero Patronae*. Aurors of Squad 10, report to the northeast corridor of the operating floor. Sectioned.”

James watched the stag gallop off.

Astoria swallowed. “*Guérisseur,* he’s...you need to be in there.”

She slid to the side, looking at her teacher meaningfully.

Lily wasn’t an idiot. A patient. A Healer down. The Vol de Mort project, a project made of the most impossible cases.

And her son.

She led the trio inside, her husband and daughter on her heels. The gallery was packed with people, filled from wall to wall. There was a menagerie of trainees and fully-fledged Healers. The department heads all lined the walls, watching with grim expressions. The matrons were murmuring and whispering, all talking over one another. And yet, everyone’s eyes were trained on what was happening down in the theatre.

When they realized that the Potters had arrived, it was as if the Red Sea had parted.

The gaggle of trainees—Patil and Smith being the only ones Lily recognized by name—gasped and pulled away, giving the Potters space by the glass. The only others that hadn’t moved were Bellatrix Black and Rodolphus Lestrange who both watched the proceedings with rapt attention, almost never blinking. The frantic energy of the gallery didn’t seem to

touch them. They breathed slow, so slow that they were barely moving, and yet each rattling exhale rolled with grief.

The first thing Lily noticed was Hermione Granger pressed into the corner, one arm thrown over her eyes as if it would keep everything she was witnessing from happening. The second thing she noticed was that Draco stood in the room, watching her son with an attentiveness that he had only ever awarded Lily, as his teacher. The fourth thing she noticed was Ron Weasley standing guard.

And the very last thing she noticed: her son.

“What...oh, *Harry*,” Lily whispered, her hand pressed to her mouth. She took a step forward, tugging Lavender forward with her. James stood on her other side and they looked down into the theatre. James turned around immediately, closing his eyes to steel himself before he looked back down at his son.

Harry stood between two bodies. One was an anonymous young man, his chest having been cracked and his heart could be seen through his ribs. The other was a man that Lily knew far too well. Tom Riddle had never looked weak in all of her years knowing him. Seeing him as still as a corpse was the most unnerving thing that Lily had ever seen, after her daughter’s mending in a theatre far too familiar for her.

Harry cleared his throat and pulled his wand out. He waved it and slowly, a familiar tune waved out of an old radio, filling the theatre.

Here come old flat-top, he come grooving slowly

He got ju-ju eyeballs, he’s one holy roller.

He got hair down to his knees

Got to be a joker, he just do what he please.

“It’s a beautiful day to conquer death,” Harry announced like a prayer. His expression was grim. “Let’s make it fucking happen.”

DIAGNOSIS

“It’s a beautiful day to conquer death. Let’s make it fucking happen.”

He paused as he stared at Tom’s body and he swallowed hard. He looked over at Hermione in the corner, and she was staring at him, a glossy sheen to her dark eyes. He looked away from her and turned to Matron Strout. Matron Strout stared back at him, just as grim.

“Let’s get it done,” Matron Strout confirmed. She took a step closer to him and grabbed him by the shoulder. “You can do this. You’re the only one that knows how. Not even *he* knows

how.”

“No pressure,” Harry said weakly.

Matron Strout didn’t smile. “All of the pressure. You have an audience.”

And then, Harry looked up.

They were all crowded into the gallery, packed from wall to wall. The seats were filled. Others perched on the arms of chairs and where they could, they stood. And right against the glass stood Lily Evans, Lavender Brown-Potter, and James Potter. They stared down at him with the same utter conviction that Tom had always looked at him with. Lily pressed her hand to the glass and nodded once at him. Harry swallowed.

You were made for this, her eyes—his eyes—seemed to say.

Harry cleared his throat and took a step back. "Patient: Tom Marvolo Riddle. Diagnosis: The Hearteater Curse," Harry announced, his hands clasped behind his back. He waited for their gasps, the appropriate reactions. "Previously, Healer Riddle and I pursued a solution to the Hearteater Virus. We made progress but ultimately failed. This will be my second attempt and we will be using one of our previous hypotheses. Today, I will be conducting the first magical heart transplant. The first successful magical organ transplant. Ever."

There was silence for a long time. And then, applause started with one person. Harry’s eyes widened as he looked at Luna Lovegood. She was staring down at him with a stern look in her eyes that looked alien to her kind face. No one else clapped but her.

Harry spun back around and cleared his throat.

“Healer?” Matron Strout asked.

"The donor, Barnabus Burke Jr, has been in a magical coma for about seven years. He has been monitored for brain activity and displays none—he is legally dead. With the permission of the Department of Mysteries, I have been allowed his body after it was donated to the Department by both his will and his family. He is within the correct age range and has proven to be a universal donor, generic in all aspects. He is a perfect match for our patient," Harry narrated as he looked from Barnabas Burke and his open chest and back up to the gallery.

They were all watching him with bated breath, squirming and unsure. Harry turned away. He would ignore them.

“*Moudiasménos*,” Harry said, anesthetizing Tom. For some reason, he expected Tom to wake up at any moment and tell him what he was doing wrong. Except, now, Harry *couldn’t* do anything wrong. There wouldn’t be any mistakes.

Mistakes meant that Tom would die, and Harry rejected that. A world without Tom Riddle was unacceptable.

“We’ll begin with the circulation of Blood-Replenishing potions through Tom’s body. Mediwizard Weasley?” Harry asked. Ron gasped as being called up and he took a step

forward, wand being pulled out.

"Ready," Ron said. He was trying to mask his uncertainty, but couldn't quite succeed. Harry could understand why. He hadn't given Ron a lot of time to get comfortable with his wild plan. But, he couldn't bring himself to care enough to comfort Ron. He just needed the man to do his job.

“I’ve selected Mediwizard Weasley with this task due to his experience in the field,” Harry said.

Ron nodded with uncertainty. “I will be overloading Riddle with Blood Replenishing potions in order to dilute possible toxins. Then, I will purge the remaining toxins and any traces of Dark magic. From there, I will be magically directing his blood through his veins, periodically oxygenating it After this process begins, we will have about an hour before we need to return this function to his body.”

Harry nodded in agreement and pointed at Ron. Ron stepped forward and began to unstopper Blood Replenishing potions, tipping them into Tom’s slack mouth. Harry turned away as Ron continued his work, looking over at Malfoy. The man had Summoned a high chair that set him right behind Tom’s head. He was completely still, his hand and wand hovering over Tom’s forehead and he was staring down intently.

"Healer Malfoy is a trained Mind Healer. To monitor his brain function, he will enter a trance state, keeping watch over Tom's activity. This will keep him under and his magical core relatively calm and alert for any changes, an effect that cannot be achieved under simple magical stasis," Harry narrated. As he spoke, Malfoy was already casting his spell, slipping deep into his trance, and his eyes going blank. Harry cleared his throat. "I have already opened up Mr. Burke's chest. As I proceed to Healer Riddle, Matron Strout will be harvesting the donor's heart."

Matron Strout took that as her cue and proceeded to Burke's body. She began her work. Harry turned back to Tom and his very still chest. He pressed the tip of Tom's own wand to his sternum and cut downwards. The blood spilled immediately, sliding from side to side, and the wound bloomed wide. Harry ran Tom's wand down his chest again, opening muscle and peeling the skin back with a twist here and there until he revealed the man's ribcage, slick with viscera.

He saw a peek of bone and ivory through the man’s ribs.

Harry cleared his throat and looked up at Ron. He nodded once, and Ron took the hint. With a few murmured words, he began to circulate the blood, completely bypassing the heart. If Harry looked between the spaces of Tom's ribs, he could see the pink-red of his lungs deflate more and more until they were flat and still.

“Ron…” Harry warned.

Ron sighed. “I *know*, Harry. *Kathairein*. *Rúħ Pneumo*,” he breathed, whispering the Purging Spell and the Oxygenating Breath Charm in quick succession. Harry stilled, holding his breath as he waited for results, and kept holding his breath when he didn’t see results.

Malfoy hummed. “Not even a reaction,” he said, almost sounding like he was in the middle of a dream. “He iz fine. Unaware. He does not dream.”

Harry didn’t think Tom believed in dreams.

“I’ll cast it every six minutes. We don’t want to oxygenate his blood. I’ll keep his heart rate slow,” Ron promised.

Harry found it odd that Ron was talking about a heart rate that didn't exist. After all, Tom wasn't breathing, and his heart was so very still. And yet, he was alive. Harry wondered if this was Death and if he would Master it. He wished Tom was here.

But, those were childish thoughts for childish days, and Harry wasn’t a boy anymore.

With swift action, he slashed his wand down, cracking down Tom's ribcage and carefully pulled out the bones, settling them onto his tray with a clatter. He winced at the sound of it and took to staring at the vicious thing that Amos had created.

Tom’s heart was beautiful.

The Hearteater Curse was *beautiful*.

It still looked like a heart, but had been twisted somewhat, and was bloodied unto itself, not because of the blood that surrounded it. Tears existed where there shouldn't be, and it looked ragged, all because of the row of vicious teeth that had emerged along the pulmonary artery and the fleshy epicardium. The teeth shifted, attempting to tear into new flesh, intent into feasting on itself until it no longer worked. The aorta looked ragged, nearly torn through.

So, Tom hadn’t had much time.

This was it.

He began to remove the cursed heart with care, slicing through blood vessels and arteries with care. He did not rush. He could not rush this.

Harry couldn’t be sloppy. He couldn’t be a lot of things. He couldn’t be hysterical. He couldn’t be grief-stricken. He couldn’t be sad, and he couldn’t be scared.

But, Harry could be one thing: a Healer, and he had hands that could soothe the ache from a patient’s face. Hands that could raise the dead. On his very first day, he had decided to aspire to greatness one day.

One day had come much faster than he thought.

When the heart came free, he cradled it in his hand. Frantically, Ron whispered the Oxygenating Charm again. Harry wasn’t sure how many times he’d heard it—maybe three or four. That was about twenty-six minutes. Twenty-six minutes of work.

“Matron Strout?” Harry asked, turning to the matron.

She was standing there with the donor heart on a tray, serving it up to him in an offering. Harry swallowed and placed the diseased heart—Tom's gorgeous, damaged heart—onto the tray, right next to the new, fresh, *pink* heart. Harry cupped it gently in his hands and walked towards Tom's empty chest. Even as a shell, he was beautiful, and Harry missed everything about him. He was right there and he missed him so much, it hurt.

"'E iz alive. 'E iz here."

Harry looked up at Malfoy. Malfoy was still staring at something far away.

"What?" Harry asked quietly.

"Tom Riddle is there. 'E currently does not 'ave a 'eart. You may want to give it to 'im," Malfoy slurred, his accent so strong that Harry could barely parse out the meaning.

His lips twitched. "I just might," Harry said almost chidingly. Slowly, he slid the heart into place, and Tom still looked beautiful and whole and perfect, and he was damaged, still damaged--*fucked up*—but they were fucked up together.

Always.

"Now?" Matron Strout asked.

Harry looked at the corner.

Now, the hard part. This part was out of his control. A task that only *one* person could complete.

"Hermione, get up," Harry barked without turning away from the two bodies. Tom's body. His love's body.

"W-what?" Hermione stammered.

"Harry…" Ron started. He murmured the Oxygenating Charm again but stared at Harry with burning eyes.

Harry shook his head. "Not an option. Ron, the man I love is sitting with a dead heart in his chest cavity. He is currently being made to breathe by one spell and his blood is being circulated by another. I need her to sew the donor heart in place with unicorn hair. Now, Hermione. Get up."

Slowly, Hermione got to her feet. He could hear the squishing of her feet. She was probably leaving bloody footprints in her wake. She turned to Ron and cleared her throat.

"Ron, please, stand back," she whispered.

Ron leaned forward. "You don't have to—"

"He's my person, and that's the man he loves," Hermione said instead. She held out her hands to Harry, staring at him, expectant and defiant. She watched as Harry Scourgified her

hands and dried them. Hermione turned away and grabbed the gloves waiting on the instrument tray, next to the bundle of unicorn hair and the needles.

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly.

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Harry nodded. “How well do you know the circulatory system?” Harry asked.

“Better than my own name,” Hermione said. “I knew I was going to be operating from the day I was born.”

"Good. I need you to sew the heart in place," Harry said. He kept his eyes trained on Tom's open chest because he knew if he looked at the man's face, if he looked at that face—slack and still, not even a mask of boredom put in place—he would break down. He wouldn't be able to do anything.

Hermione nodded. Slowly, she stepped between the two bodies and she took Harry’s face in her hands, turning him to look at her.

Quietly, she said, “I will do my *very* best work.”

Hermione cracked her neck and took up the needle. She began to work, her gloved fingers sticky with blood as she dove right into Tom's chest, sewing Barnabas Burke's heart into the empty cavity. Her hands were delicate and careful as she slowly guided the needle in and out of the man's new heart with her wand and hand. Hermione's eyes were narrowed, and there wasn't a single tremble. It was as if she had turned from porcelain to ivory to steel in seconds. When she sewed the heart into place, she began working on the major blood vessels, attaching them to the new heart with the delicate silvery strands, replacing them only when she had to. She worked tirelessly, never hesitating or second-guessing herself.

Hermione only took a step back when she was finished tying off the last knot. She stared down at his heart with a frown.

“It...Ron, are you still circulating the blood?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” Ron said firmly.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed and she looked over at Draco. “And his brain?”

“He iz not brain dead,” Draco said firmly. He was still staring at Tom with the utmost concentration. “But, finish up anytime. His Occlumency shields are...*absurdly* powerful.”

“Harry? He...it should start up on its own,” Hermione whispered. She looked devastated, but Harry felt more euphoric, more careful than he had in a long while.

“No…” Harry said softly. He turned to look at his audience. “Now that we have transplanted the new heart, the problem remains in this: the organ is viable, but whether or not it’s compatible with magic is questionable. The heart can be restarted. We must restart the cycle of magic as well. If I simply restart his heart, I will render Tom Riddle a Squib. I have

discovered a way to circumvent that by introducing a Dark spell that uses Dark magic to conduct human flesh."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Harry, wha—"

"Bloody hell," Ron whispered as he realized what Harry was about to do.

Harry took a deep breath and took a step back, swinging his wand in a dramatic arc.

"The Inferius Curse. *Balabradan Nafdugas*," he snarled with all the power that he could. He didn't pay attention to the stares or the gasps or the reactions, only staring at the jet of bright green, as bright as the Killing Curse erupted from the end of his wand.

It hit its mark.

Finally, Harry could breathe.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, so I don't know if you've all noticed, but I've been throwing in some parallels to prior chapters. The time where Cedric died was supposed to exactly mirror Ibdore Eavius and Harry's first internal procedure. A time where he succeeded against all odds and a time that's he's failed miserably.

This last culminating procedure pays tribute to a lot of internal procedure scenes we've seen throughout this story. It is reminiscent of Ibdore Eavius, it pays homage to Hermione's internal procedure with Lavender, which set her up for this immense amount of pressure, the case with the patient that had Scrofungulus and Tom went in blind—just as Harry is—, the Yaa Sang procedure—where Harry is both sloppy and brilliant—, and how he has learned to grow past that. I've made sure to include a callback to every theatre, and as the last internal procedure I'll ever write, I hope that I did it justice.

See you next time with the final chapter of Diagnosis!

SOURCES:

Hearteater Virus/Curse: themonsterblogofmonsters (see previous chapters for specific link)

Oxygenating Breath Charm: provided by EssayofThoughts

Purging Spell: provided to me by EssayofThoughts

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was utter chaos and Lily was bored of it.

“—impossible! Utterly impossible!” Severus barked.

“Clearly not,” Vance retorted. “Unless you saw something different from what I saw. I saw Harry Potter transplant a heart into Riddle’s chest. I saw him use the Inferius Curse to restart that heart. So, if it’s impossible, I must be *mad*. Am I *mad*, Snape?”

Her voice got more and more shrill, rising to cut through the air even as everyone else argued amongst themselves. James, Harry’s ex-boyfriend, Theodore Nott, and his superior were clustered away in the corner, muttering about the security breach that had occurred when at least thirty people had witnessed her son’s impossible feat. Albus was talking with Sirius and Alice Longbottom about security measures to be put in place. Luna and McGonagall were off discussing that poor matron. Luna had done her best, but McGonagall was the Spell Damage specialist.

Everyone had their own words to spit with fury into the fray. Everyone but Lily who sat down with Lavender's head in her lap. Quietly, Lily tended to her daughter, brushing her hair from her face.

“Where’s Harry?” Lily whispered to herself. “Where’s my son?”

There was no answer. No one could hear her over their own self-important shrieks.

“And Diggory?” Alice asked sharply, looking between Sirius and Dumbledore.

“Your husband and Kingsley Shacklebolt are leading the teams that have Diggory and his cohorts in custody,” Sirius reiterated. Alice nodded in understanding and she hummed.

“He’ll be receptive. He’ll need a solicitor, but I’m confident that he’ll plead guilty in return for lesser charges. After all, he didn’t kill anyone,” Dumbledore said calmly, always looking on the bright side.

“He very nearly did!” Alice protested.

“And yet, he didn’t. This is still a place of healing,” Dumbledore said, his voice full of warning. Alice retreated, her eyes narrowed into a cold thing, but she didn’t say anything to retort against the man.

Lily turned her gaze back to Theo Nott and her husband.

“You don’t *understand*," Theo Nott snapped, growing increasingly irate. His superior was strangely calm, though there was a twitchiness to his hand that set Lily on edge. "The Vol de Mort project is a top-secret project done in conjunction with the Department of Mysteries. At least thirty people just witnessed the culmination of months, if not *years,* of research.”

“I understand—” James began.

“I don’t think you do,” Nott’s superior said, his gravelly voice booming uncomfortably through the room. “Tom Riddle and Harry Potter have done incredible work, but they haven’t run this procedure by *us*. Potter didn't even know what he was doing, only guided by Riddle's, albeit extensive, notes and his own instinct. It could’ve gone catastrophically long, and yet, the Department would have had to take full responsibility under the contracts signed at the beginning of this process. One of those contracts spoke to complete *secrecy*.”

James winced at the idea and looked over at Sirius, but he was still deep in conversation with Albus and Alice about security measures. Lily looked over at him with a frown.

“Magical vows for the witnesses. Unbreakable Vows for the participants. We don’t want the media to know anything until we have the story under control. Until we know Harry’s side, and we won’t know that until Riddle is awake,” Lily said calmly, her voice cutting clear through the din.

James' eyes widened at her genius, and then nodded, a look of relief crashing over him. He was an excellent Auror—of course, he was, he was Head Auror—but he didn't know about hospital protocol.

“Potter’s side,” Severus spat, picking up on that line of conversation. His words drew everyone’s attention, all other conversations tapering off in confusion. “Where *is* Potter? Is he off spouting out tales of his brilliant exploits? As if he didn't have a team of juvenile Healers that he didn't completely rely on to pull off this hair-brained, dunderheaded—"

“You will be *silent*,” Lily snarled so fast and sharp that Lavender jerked out of her lap, pulled out of her state of half-consciousness. Lavender looked between Lily and Lily’s best friend with startled interest, as if she were witnessing a rather interesting round of wizard’s chess.

Severus gaped, his mouth opening and closing like a grindylow. “What?” he said, two ugly red spots high on his sallow cheeks.

“You can shut the fuck up,” Lily spat with so much coldness that Severus almost shivered. “Harry did something brave. Something *brilliant.* And he is in *so much* pain, right now. He just had the love of his life’s *heart* in his hands. And he operated through that. You will not belittle him and his achievements.”

“Lily, but—”

“If you say one more word about him, I will *eviscerate* you,” Lily said coldly. “If you have nothing constructive to contribute, be silent or get out.”

Severus took a staggering step back and looked over at the other Department heads. They all averted their gazes. He looked over at Dumbledore, but the man was staring back solemnly. Severus drew himself up, all arrogance and bluster.

“I am the Head of—”

“Be silent or get *out*. Those are your two choices. I will not give them to you again,” Lily said.

And Severus sat down.

DIAGNOSIS

She sat in the water, a cigarette dangling from between her fingers. She had a half-empty carton on one stool, and Ron sat on the next one, watching her. Hermione turned her gaze back to her skin. Most of the blood was gone, having swirled down the drain, like paint washing away, flaking from her skin. All that was left was the blood caked in her lovely curls. But, first, she wanted to finish her cigarette.

She’d been finishing her cigarette for the past six cigarettes.

“Hermione...would you like to talk about it?” Ron asked, gently. Hermione closed her eyes and slid further down into the water. She took a drag instead, shaking her head. “Hermione, do you want to get out? Your skin is getting wrinkly…”

“I can’t,” Hermione rasped, shaking her head. “I can’t get up.”

Ron’s eyes widened. “I-I can help you. I *can*—”

“No. I can’t get up. I’m still in the hospital. And I’m still kneeling next to the matron—Pansy Parkinson. Afterward, they told me her name was Pansy Parkinson. But, all I can remember was the matron. She almost a girl. Our age. And she was bleeding *everywhere*,” Hermione whispered. She took another drag. She wasn’t looking at him, staring at something far away from her.

Ron wondered if she was staring at Pansy Parkinson’s body.

“Hermione—” he said, gently.

“I wrapped her twice. I couldn’t stop the bleeding. It just wouldn’t stop. And all I had were the bandages, and when that wasn’t enough, I wrapped my body around her to apply pressure, because she wouldn’t stop bleeding and she *was* bleeding. Everywhere,” Hermione nearly sighed. She frowned looking up at the popcorn ceiling, humming to herself. A bit of ash fell into the water, floating across the top. She didn’t mind. “Have you ever thought about how much blood the human body can hold?”

"Seven percent of our body weight," Ron said automatically because he was nothing else if not a Healer, someone made to press a person back together no matter how messy he went about it.

Hermione had learned messiness.

"She was so small. She couldn't have been more than 8 stones. 3.3 litres of blood and I thought I saw all of it. And I nearly cried when Hannah and Luna came. And then I cried because I ran. I left her there because all I could think of was you and Harry and Neville," Hermione said softly.

Ron nodded. He paused because there was a question on the back of his tongue that he didn't want to know the answer of. But, then, Hermione opened her eyes and fixed him with that stare that tore him to pieces, that wrenched words from his tongue.

"Why didn't you look for me?" he blurted out.

Hermione smiled. "Because you...you are a survivor. You are brilliant and so, so good. And I knew that whoever had hurt Pansy was going for Riddle. And where Riddle is, so is Harry. He would've died, and we couldn't have that. We're a family."

Ron nodded because it was logical. It was cold and clinical and so very Hermione, and he was so confused because she should've *looked for him,* first, but if she hadn't, Harry would be dead. Harry and Riddle would be in the morgue, and Ron didn't know if he could live with the thought of Harry dead either. He swallowed, pushing that turmoil to the side.

"So, I left her. I shouldn't have left her, but I did. And then, Riddle...and then...God, I had my hands in his chest. I put my hands in a man's chest. A man that I know. A man that Harry loves more than anything. And I almost fucked it up. I almost...I almost *fucked it up*," she whispered, shaking. She shook her head. "I've never been so scared. I was so…"

"Shh," Ron whispered, brushing his hands through her bloody hair and nodded. He plucked the fag from her fingers and put it out on the stool. Hermione looked at him with wide eyes and Ron pushed her shoulders down. "We need to wash your hair."

Hermione slowly went under. As she did, she whispered, "Everyone almost died and I can't get up."

DIAGNOSIS

"What's going on? Do you know?" Hannah asked softly, running her fingers through Neville's hair. They had finally found a quiet moment and had tucked themselves into a corner. "Where have you been? Are you alright?"

Neville was covered in dust, but looked otherwise, unharmed. Hannah felt sick with relief.

“I’m alright. I was in a duel—”

“A duel! With...with *Diggory*?" Hannah demanded because that was all she knew so far. All she knew was that Amos Diggory had lost his mind, that he had mauled a matron, and cursed a Healer, and Harry had practically raised a man from the dead.

“No. His hired enforcers. They weren’t very hard to deal with and I wasn’t alone. My mother is a hitman, my father is an Auror, and my Gran is a retired Auror,” Neville said.

And Hannah could imagine it. She could imagine Neville standing there, spells flying from his tongue. It wasn’t what some would expect. Neville was quiet and good-natured and soft, but he was brave as they come and fiercely loyal to his friends. He was a Gryffindor for a reason.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Hannah breathed out, pressing a kiss to the seam of his lips. Neville returned it gratefully.

“And you? How are you? I heard bits and pieces of what happened while Ron took Hermione home. Something about Hermione finding a matron?” Neville asked.

"Yes. She found a matron in the pharmacy, cursed. It was terrible. Spell Damage. Deep slashes in her skin, and everything we did...we just barely saved her. Luna is talking to McGonagall now. With Riddle...incapacitated, she's the only person we could think of," Hannah said. Her eyes began to sting and she let out a quiet sob, burying her face in Neville's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her tightly as if he were trying to hold her together. "I can't believe this happening."

“I know,” Neville whispered back. “But, it did. We’re okay. We’re okay.”

They had been so close to *not* being okay.

Hannah pulled back just enough to look Neville in the eye.

“What happened to Harry? Is he alright?” Hannah asked quietly.

She hadn’t seen what had happened in that magical theatre, but she had briefly heard from Smith and Padma. Harry had done something no one had seen before. Transplanted a heart into someone else’s chest, and had pulled it together with *Dark* magic. And Harry had done it all on his lover.

Hannah had always been conflicted about Harry. He was good at what he did, uncannily so, and brave. But, he was not very kind—though, to be fair, she hadn’t always been kind to him—and there was something terribly sad in his eyes. But, there was a steeliness there too. A determination that Hannah had always admired above all. She had admired it and envied it some too. Sometimes, she wondered whether it was that steeliness that had made Neville want him.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. Hermione said that he's hiding out in Dumbledore's office," Neville said softly. He looked around as if expecting someone to be listening in, but everyone

was running back and forth, attempting to carve order out of utter chaos.

“I hope he’ll be alright,” Hannah whispered. She closed her eyes again, letting her forehead tip onto Neville’s shoulder. “I’m just so, so exhausted. I feel like I’m going to die.”

“I know. I know,” Neville said. He looked at her and gave a tired smile, different from a smile at the end of a long shift. This was a grim smile, drained of any good humor. “We were supposed to have a date tonight, weren’t we?”

“I think so,” Hannah said quietly. “Can we just...can we just go to bed?”

“Yeah. Come on,” Neville said, lacing their fingers together. They peeled away from their quiet corner, walking hand in hand. They didn’t bother to stop by the trainee changing room, deciding to do that later. Instead, they just kept moving towards the Apparition Zone.

They paused when they saw the pair lingering at the edge of the grand space, the sharp cracks echoing through the cavernous room. Astoria and Draco were pressed against a wall, their arms wrapped around one another as if they were propping one another up. Draco looked completely exhausted, emotionally, mentally, physically, and even, magically. Astoria only looked stern-faced, her nose pressed against his neck.

“Astoria—” Neville began and then he trailed off.

“Astoria, Draco, are you alright?” Hannah interrupted.

Draco looked up, his blonde hair falling limply into his eyes. He didn’t have a single expression on his face.

“He is not. The procedure took a toll. He is just exhausted,” Astoria said quietly. There was something edging into her voice, something that was almost desperate. It wasn’t something that Neville had ever wanted to hear from someone as proud as she was. “I want to get him home, but I am not very good at Side-Along, and he cannot Apparate himself.”

“Understood,” Hannah said. She looked over at Neville, a small smile on her face. She nodded once and Neville took a step forward, holding out his hand.

“Would you like to stay at Grimmauld Place for the night?”

DIAGNOSIS

Harry didn’t look up immediately when the door to Dumbledore’s office opened. Instead, he stared at his hands. These hands of his were clean, unmarked by Tom’s blood, and yet, he could still feel the man’s heart against his palms. Harry closed his eyes again and *breathed*.

“Harry. You brilliant boy. You brave man,” Albus Dumbledore said as she sat down at his desk.

Harry slowly looked up.

"Am I? Brilliant?" Harry asked. His own voice sounded so far away like he was hearing it from the very end of a tunnel. The darkness was all-consuming. He had done it, and yet, he felt like he'd done nothing at all. It was as if he had been watching everything from above like he was watching his own body commit the impossible.

“You tell me,” Albus said with a small smile and a glint of triumph in his bright blue eyes. “And how is Healer Riddle?”

“Stable. We’ve done preliminary testing. He no longer needs assistance breathing. The heart seems compatible. Malfoy ran mental testing. Reached into the mind. His Occlumency shields are still intact, so we assume that means he’s still got his magic,” Harry said.

This was normal. This felt correct. Listing out his tasks. What he’s done to help his patient. Tom Riddle was his patient. His love—

“Good. *Very* good,” Albus said. His smile was still there, but it seemed softer. There was more understanding there. “May I tell you a story, Harry?”

“You’re the Head Healer. I think you can do anything you like,” Harry said absently.

Albus hummed. “Yes, I suppose I can. I only ask because I believe this story will...aid you, in understanding the new world around you.”

Harry leaned forward in his seat. He was staring, but it was almost as if his gaze passed right through Albus. It was like he was a ghost, a shade of his former self, and the emptiness of that stare made Albus go cold. He reached out with a long hand, taking Harry’s hand in his. Harry’s gaze sharpened, ever so slightly.

“There is no shame in what you are feeling, Harry. There is no need to hide it. It is a sign of you being human—” Albus began.

"Then, maybe, I don't want to be human," Harry said, callously and terribly that Albus slowly pulled his hand away. A pallid smile spread across Harry's face. "Do you know how many people have died because of Tom and me? How many innocent people that come to us to end their suffering...well, we end it, don't we? The Vol de Mort project was conceived out of Tom's obsession with conquering Death. Instead, we delivered them to Death. The irony is...*overwhelming.*”

“And yet, this time, haven’t—”

“Have I? I don’t know,” Harry said softly. He looked over at Albus, exhaustion in every line in his face. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He was obsessed, you know. Even after Cedric died, he was obsessed.”

Albus cleared his throat. "Do you know...Harry, there comes a patient in every Healer's life, that makes them want to be better. That patient haunts you until the day that you die. Do you remember yours?"

“Katie Bell,” he whispered, immediately, because he did remember. Every time he entered a magical theatre, he thought about Katie Bell, the girl that he had promised would fly again. She never did fly. She never did get better. And Harry felt her presence every time he cut someone new open.

He’d felt her eyes on him as he pressed his hands into Tom’s chest. He heard her words.

You said that I'd fly again.

And then, he remembered Tom’s.

"Gellert Grindelwald," Harry said softly, looking over at Albus. "That was Tom's. He was your partner."

And Albus looked so terribly sad.

“Yes. He was. Gellert was a brilliant man, fraught with ambition. He wanted glory, and all he had in life was me. It wasn’t enough for him. I never thought it would be. I knew his faults,” Albus said, and he didn’t sound bitter about it, not at all. It sounded like he had made peace with it, in a way that Harry didn’t think he ever could.

Even now, thinking back to when Tom had chosen glory and greatness over him made him ache with a sour sort of fury. But, then again, that made him a hypocrite; Harry would’ve made the exact same choice.

“How did he die?” Harry asked quietly.

“Tom was brilliant from the moment he stepped into St. Mungo’s. We all knew he would be. All Outstandings on his OWLs and his NEWTs. Three letters of recommendation, one from Omar Abasi, himself. But, he was arrogant. So very arrogant,” Albus said, still without bitterness or blame. He simply looked sad. But, it was an old sadness, weathered by time. “Gellert dabbled with Darkness. He was an Unspeakable and he wanted to master Death, so very much like your Tom. Only, he touched items that he shouldn’t touch and found spells he shouldn’t cast. I hadn’t known what was happening until he complained of heartburn and coughed up blood.”

Harry knew almost immediately, and suddenly, everything clicked into place.

“The Hearteater Virus.”

“Yes,” Albus confirmed. “He was diagnosed with the Virus. He had the latent gene but his dabbling with magic he didn’t understand exacerbated the situation, and he—”

“He died,” Harry finished, softly. “He died on Tom’s table and that’s why he did this. That’s why he came up with the Vol de Mort project, why he was *obsessed* with Cedric’s case. Why he never gave up on it, even after he died.”

Albus nodded and that fading light left his eyes. He looked up, the glimmer returning.

“Then, you came along, you brilliant young man. When he was faced with the terrible curse that he sought to thwart, you came and conquered it,” Albus said firmly. “I knew when I met you—”

Harry couldn’t take the praise. He shook his head once, cutting the man off.

“I didn’t come up with it,” Harry whispered. “It was all him. He did it. He conquered the Hearteater Virus. For Gellert.”

Albus looked at him, eyes wide. Finally, he was surprised. “Harry?”

Harry looked up from his lap, green eyes blazing.

“This wasn’t just me. I’m not your Chosen One. I’m not the greatest Healer that’s ever lived. Tom did this. Tom’s brilliance and his tenacity. All I did was put the pieces together and followed the instructions. But, don’t thank me because you *saw* me do this. Thank Tom for thinking it was possible at all,” Harry said firmly. He stood from his chair and slowly walked from the room, not ever looking back.

The door swung open before him and he turned to shut it, eyes closed. Carefully, he let his forehead fall against the wood and let out a terrible sound as he slid down the wood onto his knees. His eyes felt hot and swollen, and that terrible hiccuping sound ripped from his throat again and again. He was crying. He was finally crying and he couldn’t *stop*.

Then, he felt a hand on his shoulder, slowly turning him. He caught a glimpse of dark red hair, dark like drying blood, and he felt at home. He looked up into green eyes, green eyes so like his own. Lily wasn’t smiling, nor was she crying, but she looked like she wanted to.

“Mama,” Harry whispered. He hadn’t called her ‘Mama’ in years. Not since the first time she left and told him to take care of Lavender for her. Lily looked like she’d been slapped. Her gaze softened even further, and she wrapped her arms around him.

"Harry-love, you've been so brave," Lily whispered against his head. Harry shivered in her hold, his fingers snatching at the back of his robe, his face pressed into the skin of her neck.

“Stay close to me,” he begged.

Lily held him tighter. “*Always.*”

DIAGNOSIS

The door to Number 12, Grimmauld Place creaked open so quietly that not a single person stirred. It was just as Harry had expected and how he wanted.

The candles were lit through the entryway, but the light didn't curve upstairs. Instead, they drew Harry to the parlor. Carefully, he toed off his shoes and cracked his toes with a roll of

his bones. The sound was almost deafening, and Harry winced violently, but still, no one appeared to hush him. Harry swallowed his breathing and crept forward. He was still in his trainee robes. They were splattered with tiny droplets of blood, barely noticeable on the hunter green.

But, Harry noticed.

He wanted to burn them.

He wouldn't.

Harry peeled off the robes and dropped them to the ground, leaving him only a threadbare t-shirt, too large for his bony frame, and jeans. He wished for a pair of woolen socks, then, but he didn't care enough to go upstairs. So, instead, he padded forward towards the parlor and stopped in the doorway, rocking back in his shock.

Everyone was on the floor.

Neville and Hannah were tucked up against the left couch, piles of blankets surrounding them, a nest of their own making. Draco and Astoria were tucked against the opposite wall, in even finer comforters. They looked Summoned, and were plush robin's egg, blue with silk pillows cushioning their heads. Draco Malfoy had helped him today. Harry's rival. It was a day of surprises.

Slowly, he turned back to the center.

Ron and Hermione were in the middle, laying side by side. Hermione had one arm tossed over her eyes as if shielding them from the very dim candlelight. Ron was curled in a tight C towards her, one arm underneath his head, his long fingers digging into her freshly washed curls. Harry fell to his knees and crawled towards them, getting ready to settle next to Hermione.

And then, Ron's hand flashed out, quick as a knife, and before Harry could even react, Ron was pulling Harry down between him and Hermione, their bodies both angled toward him. Harry was lying there on the bed of blankets, facing Hermione and slowly she moved her arm, her eyes bright and wide in the darkness.

Ron pressed against Harry's back, tossing his free arm over both Harry and Hermione.

"Go to sleep, Harry," Ron murmured quietly. "We'll all be here when you're awake. And so will he."

Harry let out a shaky breath and looked over at Hermione. She was simply staring at him, her expression so still. Then, she reached over and covered his eyes with her warm palm.

"Sleep, Harry."

So, he slept.

DIAGNOSIS

“Hello, everybody. If I could have your attention!” Draco shouted through the din-filled cafeteria. It was packed to the brim with Healers and matrons alike. The cafeteria was the only place large enough for a congregation of this side, and it was still close to overfilling. Even despite Draco’s efforts to address all of the medical personnel, he’d have to complete two rounds of his announcements. “Everybody!”

At his booming shout, accompanied by a well-placed *Sonorous*, the entire cafeteria fell silent, all of their eyes turning to him. Draco felt a single flash of nerves that was quelled when he looked at the line of people at the back. Astoria stood with Neville, an encouraging twist to her lips. Next to Neville was Weasley, both looking at him, encouragingly, or as encouragingly as they could. Potter and Granger were suspiciously absent, though they probably needed to hear this announcement more than others.

“I am Tr—” Draco paused, looking down at his freshly lime green robes, matching his peers. “I am Healer Draco Malfoy of the Mind Healing Ward. This past week has been arduous, for all of us, I’m sure. Becoming acclimated to the new security measures has been trying, as have the events of last week’s incident. To address this, I will be spearheading a program developed by Head Healer Dumbledore and myself.

Draco cleared his throat and nodded again, as everyone began to grow impatient. He continued, “We are currently not at full capacity. Internal procedures have been put on hold or transferred to continent hospitals. This means that we are no longer the leading hospital in Europe, and that is unacceptable. To counteract this, and to return to our position, as well as ensure the health of our personnel, the Mind Healing Ward will be re-evaluating everyone at the hospital. You will either be cleared for full duties or you won't. If you are not immediately cleared, we ask you to attend therapy sessions until we deem you fit. That is all," Draco proclaimed. Almost immediately, there was an uproar. The matrons and Healers began to shout and complain amongst themselves. Draco sighed and looked over at Healer Dumbledore, helplessly. The older man only smiled, genially and nodded. "I know this is...different. But, we must ensure the health of our patients as much as the health of their Healers. If you will form six queues to the right of me, you will arrange a time to meet with one of our Mind Healing professionals. Thank you for your time."

In a seat of immediate movement, the healing personnel pushed past one another to follow his instructions, intent on being one of the first to be cleared. Draco stepped to the side and looked over at Dumbledore.

“That went well, Draco,” Dumbledore complimented.

“Thank you,” Draco muttered. “All of the Department Heads have been cleared, yes?”

“Yes, all of them but Tom. Minerva will serve as acting Head until Tom is...ready,” Dumbledore allowed, being gentle with his words. Draco winced.

“He should be awake by now,” Draco said quietly. “Do you think it’s something I—”

“No, no,” Dumbledore said immediately. “These things take time. He will wake when he wants to.”

“Well, he needs to do it soon. Potter won’t do anything else but sit at his side or work. He should be *here*, signing up to be evaluated. He shouldn’t be ignoring the Department of Mysteries requests to meet with him or dodging his evaluations,” Draco said firmly.

Dumbledore smiled. “Come now, Draco. Where is your compassion?”

“It is *because* of my compassion that I say these things,” Draco retorted. His gaze softened, and his pointy face looked rounder, kinder. “I am...worried.”

“We all are,” Dumbledore acknowledged, looking a little more serious. “Has he been home?”

“Rarely,” Draco said. He hated that he knew that, still. Even after a week, he wasn’t fully living in his and Astoria’s flat, yet. They even had a few changes of clothes at Grimmauld Place. It was so strange, what Healing and trauma could do. “He’s either working or locked up in Riddle’s office. Guarding the work, he says.”

“He insists that it’s Tom’s work. That he cannot meet with the Unspeakables until he’s awake,” Dumbledore said kindly.

“He’s not wrong. And if he wakes up,” Draco said. Dumbledore sent him a condemning look, and Draco felt shame. “The point is, Potter needs to be evaluated more than anyone. He’s been barely at his own house, in his own bed, sleeping. Neither has Granger.”

“Ah, Healer Granger,” Dumbledore sighed. “She is still operating.”

“I haven’t evaluated her yet!” Draco squawked. “I’m to evaluate everyone involved directly in the procedure. I’ve passed Weasley, easily, but Granger—she wasn’t right in that theatre, Healer Dumbledore. Not at all.”

Granger had turned everything off when Harry had asked it of her.

I’ll do my best work. The words still haunted him. They had cut through the haze of the trance, branding themselves in his mind. And she had done her very best work, methodical in a way that made Draco think she wasn’t quite human. She was wholly unnerving, and that steeliness hadn’t gone away, that complete and utter detachment, as if she hadn’t really been there. Except, now she often stunk over cigarette ashes more than coconut oil, and she looked like she hadn’t slept in days. He knew that soon, she would crash. He hoped she didn’t burn anyone else around her when it happened.

DIAGNOSIS

Harry looked at his paperwork, feet tucked underneath him, as he lounged in the chair. With his one free hand, he shoveled cold chips into his mouth. They were from the night before, in the middle of Harry's self-imposed 48-hour shift, but they were fine. Everything was fine as long as he kept going. There was no stopping.

Carefully, he folded the notes and set them to the side. Spell Damage was currently a mess, and Harry was helping McGonagall make sense of all of Tom's work. The man had been rather preoccupied with the Vol de Mort project, and so, his regular paperwork had taken a back seat to everything else. Unfortunately, with him incapacitated, that meant it was up to Harry and McGonagall.

"When you wake up, I'm going to yell at you," Harry said quietly. He looked over at Tom, still so perfectly still in his bed. He hadn't moved an inch, and Harry didn't really think that he'd even expected him to.

It had been a long week since the procedure. A week full of security protocols and patients and an unsurprising lack of sleep. Harry hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, and he only would when he practically collapsed. Sleeping felt wasteful. Eating felt wasteful. There was always something to be done, especially now that Tom wasn't around to do his job.

"McGonagall and I have been working together. Sometimes, she yells at me like I'm a trainee, and it's funny," Harry said grimly. He hadn't laughed in over a week. "You've missed it. I'm no longer a trainee. I'm an actual Healer. Figures that my first patient would be *you*."

Still, Tom said nothing. Harry leaned forward, brushing the man's hair away from his face. He dragged his fingers down that sharp, strong nose, his cheekbones, his jawline. His fingers traced his plush lips and finally, came to a stop over his carotid artery. Harry closed his eyes and felt Tom's pulse, slamming strong and steady under his two fingers. The man was alive. Harry could sense some of his magic still there, the Inferius Curse doing its work, but it was slowly draining away, the Curse gaining its power from Tom's own continued magic.

"You'll want to study that, I'm sure. Self-powering your own heart. And we'll need to do studies. I wonder...is it ethical to conduct studies on one's self? Can you even publish that?" Harry asked. He paused, shaking his head and letting his hand drop back into his lap. "They look at me like I know something because of what I did. With your notes. But, I don't know shit. I don't even know the ethics of a research study. That's probably something you should've taught me, I think. We never got around to it."

Harry wasn't sure why he was *still* expecting an answer. He could imagine what Tom would say.

Well, you're rather distracting, aren't you, sweetheart? or *I'm Tom Riddle. I do what I like*.

Or anything equally arrogant and startlingly attractive. Harry remembered a time when Tom had told him that he had awful taste in men. That was holding up to be quite true.

"Harry! Harry?"

Harry looked up from Tom's face, turning towards the door. He held up Tom's wand, pointing it at the door carefully. That was something else; he hadn't really put Tom's wand down since he had picked it up. It was customary for patients to either keep their wands or have them tucked away for safety, but Harry hadn't been able to let it go. He even slept with it clenched to his chest. Somehow, it *felt* like Tom.

"Ron, what is it?" Harry asked. He wasn't able to keep the exhaustion out of his eyes, but he startled awake when Ron took a panicky step into the room, keeping far enough back to not push Harry's limits.

"I know you're...busy, but you're needed in the theatre," Ron said firmly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "A patient?"

"Not...not exactly. Emmeline asked for you. Hermione...Hermione's not right," Ron admitted, his voice cracking.

Harry was on his feet in an instant and he crossed the room, pushing past Ron. He shut the door behind him. They darted towards the lift, walking briskly.

"What's wrong with her?" Harry asked.

"She hasn't been to see the Mind Healers yet. She said that it was 'unnecessary'," Ron said, scoffing at the very idea of it. "She's been working like mad. Almost as bad as you."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Ron stared back at him, unapologetic in his statement. "Almost as bad as you," he repeated. "I was watching her today. She was completing an internal procedure on this kid with Emmeline, and the mother slipped into the gallery. The mother screamed and Hermione *nicked* something and then collapsed to the ground. Emmeline tried to get her up and *I* ran down and tried to get her up. When we couldn't, Emmeline sent for you."

Harry swallowed. "Dammit, Hermione," he whispered under his breath, his voice cracking. They exited the lift on the theatre floor and Harry followed Ron's lead through the double doors.

Being in the magical theatre made his breath catch in his throat, but he kept steady.

Emmeline stood over a slab, her bouncy curls pulled atop her head in a careful bun, her bright red lipstick smudged by time. She didn't look up from her patient—a boy of only about nine.

"An unfortunate run-in with a Kneazle. *Very* unfortunate," Emmeline said without looking away. "I'm re-attaching his eye. It's very delicate work. I'm nearly done."

Emmeline was careful not to look away from her patient, but Harry could see the tension in her entire body.

"Where is she?" Harry asked.

“Behind me.”

Harry’s eyes widened and slowly he looked down at the ground. Hermione was lying there, her back to him and the door, her entire body shivering. Harry looked back up at the gallery and saw that no one was there.

"I made the mother leave the gallery. She was the only one that saw," Ron said quietly. "She wasn't even supposed to be there."

Harry nodded and he slowly walked forward, his steps the only other sound in the entire theatre. He walked around Emmeline and stared down at Hermione didn’t look up at him. She murmured something that Harry couldn’t understand.

“What was that, Mione?” Harry said, sweet and soft.

Hermione flinched violently.

“I can’t get up,” Hermione said, quietly from the ground. Harry nodded as he fell to his knees and laid down on his side, staring at her with wide eyes. He didn’t frown, he didn’t smile. He only stared at her, and somehow that made Hermione feel alright. Safe. “I can’t be in here. I can’t.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. “You were doing great.”

Hermione keened. "I heard his mum scream. She screamed and...and he's lost so much blood. Like Pansy. And I couldn't stop thinking about it. I-I couldn't. Suddenly...I was back in the pharmacy with all of the blood. Back in that hallway with you, dragging you away, and I could feel your scream vibrating against my palm. I thought we were going to die."

Harry nodded, slowly, his clammy face pressed into the cool ground.

“But, we didn’t. And you were so brave. You saved me,” Harry said, and he had no doubt that she did. He would’ve done something recklessly stupid if she hadn’t been there. “You saved me *and* Tom.”

“I can’t feel anything,” Hermione whispered.

“I know. I know. Come with me,” Harry said, holding out his hand. He reached for her gloved hand, and Hermione shook her head against the floor, shivering so hard that he could practically hear her teeth chattering.

“I can’t move my legs. I can’t get up,” Hermione said, swallowing her sobs. No one else was there but them. Even the matron and Emmeline working couldn’t permeate their tiny bubble. Harry looked around, searching for an answer. “I can’t feel anything and I can’t get up.”

Harry swallowed. “Uh...uh...feel my hand,” Harry called. He reached forward, wrenching the glove from her hand, tossing it to the side. He laced their fingers together and squeezed hard, feeling the heat of her palm against his. “Do you feel that?”

Hermione was still for a long moment and slowly she nodded. “Y-yeah.”

“Good. You’re going to be okay. We’ll get up when you’re ready. You tell me when you’re ready,” Harry said quietly.

They laid together for a long moment as Emmeline worked over them. Harry never tore his eyes away from her dark brown eyes. Slowly, their pulses fell in sync, their breathing even with one another. With one look, Harry felt like he could see every part of Hermione, even the ugly parts that she was terrified of showing Ron because she loved him too much. And she could see the terrible, broken parts that he displayed in his weakest moments, the jagged edges of himself that he kept getting caught on.

Hermione sat up first, breathing softly and Harry sat up with her, looking at her.

“I’m ready,” Hermione said quietly. And then, she looked away from Harry at the man that stood in the corner of the room, patient and watching. She reached out to him. “Ron?”

Ron looked startled for a moment and then he crossed the room towards in three enormous steps. He was at her side in an instant and pulling her to her feet in the next. Harry dropped Hermione's hand and smiled up at the pair. They pulled him up and Hermione turned into Ron, pressing her forehead to his chest to ground herself.

“Alright there, Hermione?” Ron asked. It would’ve been callous if Hermione didn’t smile up at him, small, but there.

“Maybe,” she decided.

Emmeline looked up from their patient, finally ending the procedure. She looked far too kind for the events that had transpired. Hermione almost flinched away from that kindness.

"Will you be able to operate with me for the rest of the day or do you need some time off?" Emmeline asked softly.

Hermione opened her mouth, protests leaping off her tongue. “No, I can—I can work.”

"You can, but that doesn't mean you should," Emmeline said firmly. "You…you need to go see Healer Dumbledore or Healer Malfoy. Or someone. I was wrong…to allow this. I needed you here. The patient needed you. I let that cloud my judgment."

“That’s our patient!” Hermione protested.

“And you’re my student! You need to take care of yourself, Hermione,” Emmeline said firmly. “So, what’s it going to be?”

Hermione swallowed, and looked at Harry and then up at Ron.

Quietly, she asked him, “If you’re not...if you’re not busy, will you—and *Harry*—walk upstairs with me to see Healer Dumbledore?”

Ron looked over Hermione’s head, quirking an eyebrow over at Harry. Harry gave a sad smile.

“Anytime.”

DIAGNOSIS

Bellatrix had expected him to ward the door within an inch of its life. After all, Potter didn’t trust anyone with Tom, except for maybe Matron Miriam Strout. But, Bellatrix just slipped inside without any trouble. Not even a Caterwauling Charm. Half-heartedly, she cursed at Potter in her head for leaving Tom defenseless. But, then again, Bellatrix remembered a broken boy with his hands in his love’s chest, and couldn’t quite muster up the necessary rage.

Bellatrix shut the door behind her and frowned at Tom.

He was so still. It was disconcerting. Tom was full of life and brimming with impatience to *do* something. Even in his most calm moments, Tom was anticipatory. This wasn’t that. This was still like a corpse, and Bellatrix *hated* it.

Tom should be wide-eyed and walking away, snide comments dripping from his lips, moving through space like he owned the air around him. Arrogance and charm in heaps. Greatness personified.

"You look like shit," Bellatrix spat out. It was the first thing that leaped from her tongue. She fell into the chair at Tom's bedside, and shook her head, condemning him again. "Utter shit, Tom."

Tom didn’t respond. Bellatrix could imagine his response anyway, *Look in the mirror, you crazy bitch*.

"A lot has happened. Amos Diggory tried to murder you. What did you do to entice that? How did that even happen? You're supposed to be the best and brightest of us all. You were always the best dueller. I don't understand," Bellatrix muttered. She paused. "You turned your back on him, didn't you? Because of Potter. Of course because of Harry *fucking* Potter.”

Of course, I did. I love him.

But, no. That didn’t *quite* sound like Tom. Those were the words that he’d mean to say, but could never force from his tongue because he was an emotionally constipated jackass. Really, Tom would say, *Well, I couldn’t very well let him die.*

Arrogant dick.

The door opened behind her and Bellatrix didn’t need to look up to know who it was. She knew his steps like she knew her own breath in her lungs. After all, he was always there to her. Even when she had run far away—away from it all, like she was a child instead of a

grown woman—he had been there in her ear, in her sleep, in her shadow, dogging her like the nightmare that he was. *Her* nightmare.

“Hey, asshole,” Bellatrix whispered, her voice cracking. “You better wake up.”

Tom didn’t respond.

“You better wake up because I love you and I can’t *bear* it,” Bellatrix said, crumpling over in her chair. She clung tighter to his hand, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her entire face was twisted; she had always been an ugly crier. Terrible sobs cracked out of her throat and she shook with the force of it all. “Rodolphus...Rodolphus is *here*. And he *loves* me in a way that you weren’t capable of. And I want to *talk* to you about it. I want to tell you how much I love him. Because we used to be able to talk about anything. Tom, wake the fuck up.”

Rodolphus’ breath caught in his breath. He took a step forward and then seemed to think better of it. “Bella,” he murmured, instead.

Bellatrix stared down at Tom, and then her eyes narrowed into a glare.

“I miss you so much. Tom, I miss you more than *air*. I can’t do this without you. We can’t do this without you—our fearless leader. So, stop being a coward. Get *up*,” Bellatrix snarled. And when Tom didn’t even flinch, she roared, “Stop it! You’re making him wait for you! I think you’ve made Harry *fucking* Potter wait long enough. So, stop it. Get up.”

But, Tom didn’t move.

And Rodolphus was right behind her, his hands falling on her shoulders and squeezing hard. Bellatrix finally looked up at him, her eyes wide and terrified. Suddenly, he felt like they were children again, searching for somewhere to belong, drifting out alone. They had stopped feeling like that when they had met Tom—the glue that bound them together.

"Harry Potter is waiting," Rodolphus said, softly. "And he's waited for far, far too long."

DIAGNOSIS

“Thank you, Healer Malfoy. I can go back to work?” the matron asked.

"You are approved. I have signed off. All you need is your supervisor's signature, and you will resume full duties," Draco said primly. The matron smiled at him, fluttering eyelashes and a tempting pout, but Draco had always preferred cold discipline and overwrought ambition if he was being perfectly honest.

When the matron saw that he wasn't going to respond, she pouted and stalked out of his office, wounded. Draco snickered at her, shaking his head in disbelief.

An office. *He* had his own *office*.

He was an official *Healer*.

Not many Healers got their own offices, but Draco was in charge of the evaluation programme *and* he was a Mind Healer. Mind Healers got the best perks. Draco was a fool not to see it before. Spell Damage was flashy and glamorous, but the truly intense work was in Mind Healing. Draco glanced at his schedule.

"*Tempus*," he cast, waving his wand. He groaned in irritation. His meeting had run over and now he was late to the next one. Briskly, he left the office, locking it with a sharp jab of his wand and proceeded down the steps.

Draco continued down the hall of the Children's Ward, nodding to everyone that he passed. He couldn't help but look for Astoria. He had barely seen her all week, despite the fact that they were sleeping at Grimmauld Place in the same bed. She was like a ghost and he was always just missing her. He flung his chosen door open.

"You're late, Malfoy," Romilda Vane snapped, skinny arms crossed over her chest.

"I don't think I am," Draco said calmly. He startled briefly when he saw Astoria standing in the corner of the room, her expression carefully blank.

"I can read a clock and *that* says 2:07. Our meeting was at 2," Romilda said, snottily. Draco turned his head to hide his smile.

"I suppose it down. No matter," Draco said. He glanced at Astoria again. "Healer Greengrass."

"Healer Malfoy," she returned. If she found it strange that he was referring to her by title, she didn't show it. Romilda was watching the pair of them like they were an interesting Quidditch match.

"What's this meeting about today, anyway? And why weren't you here to see me yesterday?" Romilda pouted.

"I'm currently running a new program to evaluate the mental health of all St. Mungo's personnel after what happened last week. I've been very busy, but no one is more important than you. *You* are my high priority. Do you understand that?" Draco asked calmly.

Romilda's bruised ego seemed to heal just a little and she looked up at him. She didn't have any eyelashes.

"Yeah," Romilda whispered, softly. Then, a sly look entered her gaze and she leaned forward, eyes darting between Draco and Astoria. Draco was careful not to look at Astoria. "Were you brave last week, Malfoy?"

Draco felt his face burning, and he hated it. Whenever he flushed, he turned ugly splotches of pink and it was the most unattractive he could ever be.

"He was. He did something...very brave," Astoria interrupted, fondness infiltrating her words despite the blankness of his expression.

Romilda actually looked shocked at the acknowledgment. "So, he saved you?"

Astoria visibly startled.

“Romilda—” Draco started.

“I’m sorry?” Astoria asked.

“He made me get under the bed to hide me in case someone came to hurt me. And then, he went looking for you,” Romilda said, innocently. Draco glared at her, but she just beamed back at him. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Astoria didn’t say anything for a very long time. Then, she cleared her throat.

“I’m here to evaluate whether or not Draco has approved your request for visitors,” Astoria said kindly. She looked over at Draco.

“Approved.”

Romilda squealed, leaning forward. “Really? My friends can come? I’ve been owling them for weeks!”

“Yes, they can come. As long as we finish our session today,” Draco said firmly.

Astoria nodded once at both of them and then turned on her heel. She seemed slightly off-kilter as she left the room, but Draco didn't say anything. He turned back to Romilda, prepared to begin their therapy session, but she was glaring at him.

“You’re just going to let her leave?” Romilda demanded.

“Uh. *Oui*?”

“You can’t. You have to go after her. That’s what they all do,” Romilda proclaimed.

“Who is ‘they’?” Draco drawled, leaning back in his chair.

“On the radio programmes. I get bored, so I listen to the WWN. During the Story Hour, at the climax of the programme, there has to be a big dramatic love scene where the childhood friends confess that they’ve been in love all along. So *go* do it! Do the big, dramatic love scene!” Romilda shrieked. She pointed at the door, hollering so loud that Draco cringed, expecting Astoria to burst back in.

“*D’accord.* Okay. I am going,” Draco snapped, pushing up from his chair. “Merlin. This is so unprofessional.”

Carefully, he walked towards the door and stopped. He looked over his shoulder, but Romilda was staring back at him, eyes blazing.

“Be brave, Draco Malfoy. You make me want to be brave. You have to be brave too. Go. And then we’ll do therapy.”

Romilda's tone brooked no argument. Draco nodded once and turned around, taking a deep breath. He threw open the door and nearly collided with Astoria as he pulled the door shut behind him. She was still standing in the middle of the hallway, and all of her masks were torn away, leaving someone open and vulnerable.

He could see the meat of her and he remembered when they were children. He remembered the days when Astoria couldn't get out of bed for anything, when she was in so much pain that she used alcohol to numb herself. He remembered his mother disappearing within herself, hollowing herself out like an apple core until she was practically nothingness. He remembered sobbing on Astoria's shoulder as she held him and whispered, *D'accord, d'accord, je suis là. D'accord, d'accord, tu n'es pas seul. Je suis là.*

"*Je suis là,*" he said softly to her.

"*Je sais*," she whispered. And to some that wouldn't mean anything--*I know.* But, to Draco—who was English, but French in his soul—he knew the difference between *Je connais* and *je sais*. *Je connais* meant *I am familiar with it in my mind*.

Je sais meant *I know it in my soul.*

"*Did you really look for me?*" she asked. Astoria wasn't looking at him, not really.

"*I have always looked for you. I am* always *looking at you.*"

Astoria took a step forward. "*I have known you forever. I have known you at your worst—arrogant, cruel, snobbish, brat. And I have loved you anyhow,"* she said. "*You have grown so much and I am so proud of you. And I know you don't think this, but, you are a far better man than your father ever was.*"

Draco hesitated for only a moment and then he took her by the back of her neck and tugged her forward. They were of a height, they always were. They'd always grown together, never apart, and Draco had never, in his entire life, expected to be graced with someone as wonderful as Astoria. He wondered what he'd done to deserve it.

"*Je t'aime*," he whispered against her lips, and he kissed her.

He hadn't been afraid in a long time.

DIAGNOSIS

"Hi. I'm back," Harry said, mustering up all the cheerfulness that he could as he waltzed into Tom's room. He turned his back to the still body and dropped his files onto the long cabinet there. He grabbed at the edges that cut into his palms, using the feeling to ground him. "It's been a long day. Very busy. We finally got the Spell Damage ward back in proper order. The

Aurors have been here for about a week and a half now. They're creating brand new security measures. It's good."

Harry paused, waiting for an answer to fill the air, but nothing came. So, he took a step back and began to rearrange his files. There were a few discharge papers that he needed McGonagall to sign—documents that Tom would've signed if he were awake—but most of the files were about the Vol de Mort project. He never left them around anywhere, so protective of their work.

"I wish you'd wake up," Harry whispered. "I can't—I don't know what I'm doing. They don't—can't—talk about it, not until we publish the paper. I don't really know how to write an academic paper. So many things I still have to learn."

Harry shook his head because thinking of that made his stomach hurt. It made his head spin. Everything about it was disorienting. There was nothing normal. There shouldn't be a constant Auror presence at St. Mungo's—a place of *Healing*. Hermione shouldn't be too nervous to step into a theatre, chain-smoking a pack a day to keep herself together. Ron shouldn't be so quiet. Neville shouldn't be so twitchy. Harry shouldn't feel so empty.

Tom shouldn't be in that bed.

And yet, they were.

"The Unspeakables have been sending me, like, three owls a day. Demanding a meeting about the Potter-Riddle method. That's what they're calling it," Harry scoffed, shaking his head. "I wonder what you'd think."

"I think that the Riddle-Potter Method sounds better."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. He didn't dare to breathe, because if he did, the exhale would shatter his hallucination, and he couldn't bear it if he turned around, and Tom was lying there, still gone from the world. If he turned around, Harry would have to admit that he had failed.

"Sweetheart."

That voice again.

Slowly, Harry looked over his shoulder. Tom was sitting up against the headboard, his burgundy eyes wide. His voice was hoarse from disuse, but he was alert and bright-eyed, a strange little smile twisting his face. Harry spun around completely and fell back against the cabinet, the edge biting into the small of his back.

"Tom," Harry said. His voice was surprisingly steady.

Tom's smile grew into a wicked grin. "Harry. It's a shame. Where are the tears? Haven't you missed me?"

Harry let out a short sob and took a step forward. "Fuck you, Tom. I'd...I'd fucking punching you in the chest, but that would ruin all of my hard work!" he cried out and then he flew

towards Tom’s bedside and threw his arms around the man’s neck. Tom wrapped his arms around his back, his fingers stroking the hairs at the nape of Harry’s neck.

He grip was still loose. He hadn't gained all of his strength back, and muscle atrophy had already begun to set in, but he was there. He was warm and alive and pressed against Harry's chest like he never wanted space between them again. Harry pulled back just enough to look into Tom's eyes, and he was smiling.

“Well, give us a kiss, then, sweetheart,” Tom said, coaxing Harry forward.

Harry leaned in, sliding onto the edge of the bed and kissed him hard. He licked into the man’s mouth and tilted his head just so that the kiss was all sliding tongues and hard-pressed lips. Harry devoured him, tasting his sleep-sour breath on his tongue and loved it because it meant that he was *alive*. Harry pulled back when he needed to breathe and then he shoved the man’s shoulder. Tom barked out a laugh.

“I’m still angry. I’m angry at you. You’re the fucking worst. Why. Did. You. Turn. Your. Back!” Harry hissed at him even as he brushed Tom’s hair back from his face. He repeated his words, leaning down to press his lips to Tom’s after every sentence.

“I adore you,” Tom laughed into his mouth. Harry smacked his shoulder and leaned back, eyes narrowed when Tom smirked back at him.

“You are a genius,” Harry said.

“I know,” Tom agreed almost immediately. His eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Inferi, Tom? You came up with *Inferi*?”

“You put it into practice,” Tom said, and if he was even a little upset about the fact that all of his years of research had been completed with Harry’s procedure, he didn’t show it. He was smiling, more freely than Harry had seen in a long while.

“Yes. I—I transplanted the heart from the doner. Barnabas Burke Jr.”

Tom’s eyes widened. “My...my magic?” he asked, softly.

Harry held out his wand, handle first. “I’ve been keeping it safe.”

The moment Tom took it into his hand, a burst of red sparks showered between them, glittering into nothingness. Tom looked from his wand and then back at Harry’s face, a wild sort of wonder there.

“You...oh, love, you’re fucking brilliant, aren’t you? What did you do?” he asked.

“I did the transplant. I had Ron using the Oxygenating Breath Charm to keep the oxygen in your blood. Malfoy monitored your brain activity. When I put the heart in your chest, I thought that the Dark magic might corrupt the organs, so I had Hermione sew it in place with unicorn hair. Light and Dark. A balance. And then, I needed to restart both your heart *and*

magic and the Inferius Curse made sense. But, you already knew that," Harry vomited out, babbling in his attempt to get all of his words out.

Tom looked properly smug. "I had my suspicions, but I didn't know for sure."

"Your suspicions were a fully researched hypothesis. How long had you been considering the Inferius Curse?" Harry asked.

"Long enough to know that it was a hypothesis based on too many assumptions. At the time, the transformative Healing through potions and spells seemed our only path to success. But, Cor Cordis was a failure," Tom admitted. "I backtracked and looked into our previous hypotheses, the ones that we eliminated. After a closer look, the Inferius Curse was the only viable hypothesis, though there were still far too many variables."

"I noticed," Harry said softly. "Tempering the destructive, Dark nature of the curse and its impact on the surrounding organs. Time constrictions. Cycling the blood. Making sure that you remained *alive* so that I didn't reanimate a soulless puppet."

"But, you didn't. You *did* keep me alive," Tom said. He reached forward, pulling Harry forward again until their foreheads touched. Harry laughed softly against his lips. "Darling, you're incredible."

He pulled Harry into a rough kiss that Harry happily returned, laughing into the man's mouth.

"I'm *great*," Harry whispered against his lips, because with Tom awake that meant he *had* done something great. He had done something no one else had before, and he hadn't done it alone, but he had brought it together. He *had* made it happen.

Harry pulled back, all of the tension that had resided in his shoulders gone.

"I still think Riddle-Potter method sounds about right. It was *my* idea," Tom pointed out.

Harry snorted. "Oh bugger off!"

"I'd much rather bugger you."

"Oh, are you on that again?" Harry asked, laughing. "You've just come out of a *coma* and you're already thinking about fucking?"

Tom rolled his eyes. "Oh, don't tell me that you weren't thinking about it too. I want to make you scream."

Harry swallowed hard at the thought, his mouth going dry. Tom pressing him into the mattress and licking down his spine, parting his arse cheeks and licking his hole. Tom grabbing him by his hair and yanking him up as he slammed into him from behind. Tom—

"I don't think you'll be able to get it up anytime soon," Harry said briskly. "You're in *recover*y."

"Yes, Healer Potter," Tom leered, looking up and down at Harry in his lime green.

Harry snorted. Tom readjusted in his bed, and his hospital robes slipped just so that Harry could see the top of his scar. It was thin and silvery, but in the harsh light of the hospital room, it was rather obvious. Harry straightened.

“I have a name for it. The Frankenstein Method. A man pulled apart and put back together in a flash of light. Catchy, eh?” Harry said with a small smile. Tom stared at Harry for a long time. Harry stared back, unblinking, confusion slowly spreading across his face at Tom’s non-reaction.

“I’d like to take out to dinner,” Tom declared.

Harry reared back, biting his bottom lip to keep from smiling. “Oh, really?”

“Yes. I’m going to take you out dinner. We’ll go back to my flat for a nightcap. I’ll introduce you to my snake. And then, I will take you to bed, and I will make love to you. Then, when we wake up, you can make me your shitty eggs and we’ll walk back into St. Mungo’s *together*,” Tom declared with such conviction that Harry had to throw back his head and let out a long laugh that was so goofy that Tom snorted in response to it.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Harry snorted, shaking his head. He paused in his laughter when he saw the utterly soft look in Tom’s bright burgundy eyes. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Merlin,” Tom breathed. “I just…have never been more in love with you.”

Harry *beamed*.

DIAGNOSIS

“Healer Potter,” Tom drawled as Harry slid into the room, falling back against the door as he looked at Tom. Harry bit his bottom lip, faltering as he looked at the man.

Tom looked healthier than he had three days ago when he had first woken up. The man had bullied his way into casual robes over the patient robes, and he was wearing them open over his bare chest. Harry licked his lips as he looked as he looked at the silvery scar over his chest, and slowly looked up at Tom. Tom was watching him with that smirk.

“None of that,” Harry warned. He tried to fight a slow smile, but only managed to bite his lip hard enough for him to flinch.

“None of what? I’m not doing anything,” Tom said.

Harry scoffed as he crept forward, sliding onto the edge of the bed.

“What did I say last time we talked about this?” Harry said.

Tom nodded once. “I remembered. ‘You say the words’. Didn’t I say them? Would you like to hear them again?” Tom taunted. He pressed his big hand to the back of Harry’s neck and tugged him forward, his breath brushing against Harry’s lips. “I love you.”

Harry jolted against him. “Say it again.”

"I'm not going to say it for your amusement," Tom laughed against his lips, and he licked the bottom one slow. Harry shuddered and slid into the man's lap, tossing his legs over in a straddle. Tom's hand stayed anchored on the back of his neck and the other slipped down, bunching up Harry's robes around his waist so that he could press that large hand against his back.

It felt like a hot brand and Harry rocked in the man’s lap.

“Say it again. For me.”

“I haven’t heard *you* saying it,” Tom teased.

Harry hummed, sucking on Tom’s bottom lip before pulling back. “I love you,” he whispered. He pressed his lips to the man’s neck and confessed to his pulse point. “I *love* you.”

“Now, I can’t say it often. I’m not the type,” Tom said, sounding serious suddenly. Harry pulled back and laughed.

“I wouldn’t want you if you were,” Harry said and then he grabbed Tom by his shoulders. “Now, lay down. I want to suck your dick.”

“And I’d love for you to suck my dick,” Tom said smoothly. He fell back against the headboard, looking over at Harry expectantly. Harry let out a barking laugh as he shimmied down the bed until he was settled in between the man’s legs and slowly peeled back the cover. He looked up at Tom through his eyelashes. “Oh, *very* seductive.”

“Oi, be grateful. This is *very* unprofessional. I am your *Healer*,” Harry said with a pointed finger.

Tom grinned, slow and sly. “Do you have a magical healing mouth?”

“I could not do this,” Harry snapped.

“No! You already offered,” Tom said.

Harry winked and made quick work of the laces on Tom’s pants. The man lifted his hips in assistance and Harry’s mouth watered as he looked at the long, thick cock. It had been a long time since he’d come face to face with this cock. It was still as massive as he remembered. He had missed the weight of it on his tongue. He wanted to *choke* on this cock.

“I want to choke on this cock,” Harry sighed, his breath fanning over the half-hard dick. He grinned, delightedly, as it twitched and he wrapped his hand around the shaft, feeling the veins and watching it stiffen in his grip as he jerked it slowly.

"Merlin, Harry, you're so good for me, aren't you?" Tom asked, stroking his thumb over Harry's bottom lip, dipping it into his mouth slowly.

Harry felt hot all over and he whined around the man's appendage, his cheeks howling out as he sucked hard. He rolled his hips against the bed and pulled off Tom's thumb with a pop. He dragged his tongue up the long shaft, chasing the vein that ran up to the underside and wrapped his lips around the head, never tearing his gaze away from Tom. Relaxing his throat, slowly, he took Tom's cock deeper, his lips stretched farther than they had been in a long while. Tom's head dropped back with a heavy thumb and his hand fell in Harry's hair.

"Right there—"

"Riddle, I need to speak to you—"

Harry's eyes widened in horror and he jerked back, forgetting about his teeth.

"Oh *fuck*!" Tom snarled in pain and Harry pulled off entirely, diving for the blanket to throw over himself and Tom's exposed and suddenly very soft cock. "What the *fuck* do you want Evans?"

"What I didn't want was to see your cock in my son's throat," Lily snapped, her voice sounding muffled. Harry's cheeks burned bright red and he shivered in horror. "Hello, Harry."

There was a long moment of silence and meekly, Harry reached out from under the covers and waved.

"U-uh, hello...Mum," Harry whispered.

His little sister had once washed cum from his hair.

Astoria Greengrass had caught him in flagrante delicto with Tom Riddle while he was on a date with another man.

But, this—his own mother catching him with Tom Riddle's cock in his mouth—took the cake.

"Don't you know about locking charms? Good God," Lily hissed, shaking her head.

Harry slid from under the covers. His face was bright red, burning brighter than ever before. He had never been prone to blushing, not after all the shit he'd gotten up to at Hogwarts and certainly not after having his dirty laundry aired out to the medical personnel of St. Mungo's, but *this*. This was absolutely mortifying.

"Don't you know about *knocking*?" Tom retorted just as fast.

"I...haveto *go*. I have lunch with Hermione and Ron and Neville," Harry said, carefully avoiding Lily's gaze. He ducked his head down and made to leave when Tom's hand flew out and wrapped around his wrist. Tom tugged Harry back roughly and pulled him down.

“Sweetheart,” Tom murmured, smiling slow and soft up at him. “Give us a kiss.”

Harry’s embarrassment slowly ebbed away and his lips curled up involuntarily.

“Fuck off,” he whispered, and then he kissed the man anyway.

He pulled back, a stupid smile on his face and dazed, he spun around. He looked up at Lily and felt a dull sense of embarrassment, but it wasn’t quite as powerful as it had been only moments before. Lily looked disturbed, but also soft as she looked at her son.

She reached forward, squeezing his shoulder and nodding. He was a grown man, she realized. Lily wasn’t sure when it happened, but somehow her little boy had become an adult, and she had missed it. She had missed it entirely. For a moment, she was struck with sadness because she hadn’t made him this way. She hadn’t taught him how to be a good person, a good man, but here he was anyway, despite her shitty parenting. Lily felt a flush of pride.

“Are you still coming for dinner tonight?” Lily asked gently.

Harry hesitated, looking back over his shoulder at Riddle, before turning back to Lily.

“Well...I’ll be here at the hospital, but when everything is...settled, I’d like for you and Dad and Lavender and even Sirius and Remus to have dinner at Grimmauld Place. With me and my friends. And uh...*him*,” Harry said, jerking his thumb back at the bedridden man.

“Me? Since when?” Riddle demanded.

Lily snorted at the fearsome look Harry shot over his shoulder.

“Since I said so. I’m your Healer. Do as I say and don’t be a fucking dick,” Harry hissed. Even his words were tempered by the smile on his face. He left without another word, closing the door behind him.

Lily wasn’t like her son. Carefully, she threw up a locking charm. She didn’t want this conversation to be interrupted. Riddle was watching her now, like a predator sizing up another just like itself. It was disconcerting. Lily allowed the softness of her drain away, leaving cold, detached rigidity in its place.

“That was something I never wished to see,” Lily drawled. Riddle—or Tom, rather, she should start thinking of him as Tom—stared back at her, all arrogance and spite. Except, Lily had seen how fast that mask had been pulled up. Tom liked to present himself as arrogant, in charming, talented, neurotic sort of way, but Lily had *seen.*

She had seen the softness in his eyes, the utter pleasure at seeing Harry’s laughter and his bright smile. Tom’s eyes narrowed.

“Perhaps, you should learn to knock, Healer Evans,” he repeated, still so precisely charming but there was a chilliness to his voice. “You wanted to speak. So speak.”

Lily opened her mouth and then closed it again. Suddenly, she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say.

“I...well, I suppose you were right. You *did* change the face of medicine,” Lily said quietly. She hated spitting out those words, but they were true. She couldn’t begrudge Tom his accomplishments. Harry may have been the hands to pull it together, but Tom had been the progenitor of the idea.

“I *was* right,” Tom drawled, smug. His eyes sharpened even more. “And *you* were wrong.”

Lily felt irritation welling inside of her and she cleared her throat, standing up straighter to push it all down.

"Perhaps," Lily admitted, her lips curled back over her teeth. It almost hurt to say it.

Tom leaned forward. “Don’t ever presume to know how I feel or why I do the things that I do, Lily Evans. Just know this: I care for your son a great deal. And that is *all* you need to know. He’s a grown man. He doesn’t need his mum following after him. He hasn’t for a long time.”

Lily flinched because maybe that was true. She had held him while he cried over this arrogant, callous man, just last week, but that hadn’t happened again. Harry didn’t seek her out to get advice about boys or to ask about things that mothers should teach their sons like how to be an adult. Harry was figuring that all out on his own and with his *family*. And maybe Lily was part of that now—that family—but he had other people to take care of him too.

He had Hermione Granger, whose incredible strength and intellect frightened Lily because it reminded her of herself—except, she *saw* Hermione Granger’s incredible compassion in that theatre when she had pulled herself up from the floor and began to work despite her trauma. Harry had Ron Weasley, loyal to a fault and ready to call Harry out on his bullshit much faster than Severus ever had for Lily. Harry had Neville Longbottom, kind and gentle but fierce when necessary, always quick to defend what was *right.*

And Harry had Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle, this man who was not worthy and seemed to know it. This man who was brilliant and neurotic and brimming with glory and rage. This man who looked at her son and his compassion and love and ambition and his hero-complex. This man who looked at her son and all his broken parts and didn’t try to fix him. This man who loved her son *because* of his faults, and not in spite of them. This man.

This man.

“Don’t hurt him,” Lily whispered, her voice cracking just so. “He’s...going to be great.”

Tom sighed, almost as if he pitied her.

“That’s your problem, Healer Evans. You think in terms of abstract greatness. As if that’s the measure for us as Healers, as human beings. Maybe that *is* how you measure people like us, but Harry’s not like us. He never was,” Tom drawled. “Harry’s not great. He’s *extraordinary*.”

DIAGNOSIS

Tom’s nose wrinkled. An entire week awake and he had only just moved on from a potions-based diet to porridge two days ago. He wondered how long it would take until he could eat real food and leave the fucking bed. Now, he understood why patients turned their nose up at their food. It was barbaric. There was surely something abusive about making patients eat the shit that the house elves cooked up for them.

“It’s really not that terrible. May I suggest cardamom?”

Tom looked up at Albus, the old man hovering in the doorway with his omniscient glinting eyes and his genial smile. He used to hate the old man, always pretending to be wise and shit. It had been hard to hate him after his partner had died on Tom’s watch.

“I hate cardamom,” Tom spat.

Tom actually like cardamom quite a bit. It did well as a cinnamon substitute.

“Harry has said that by tonight, you should be able to eat real food, and once you can walk without tiring, he’ll discharge you,” Albus said. Tom’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Albus knew far too much about his file. The man smiled at him and settled in the chair next to his bed—Harry’s chair. “I know that you aren’t a very patient man.”

“I can determine when I should be discharged. I’m Head of Spell Damage,” Tom snapped. “He needs my signature.”

"Not quite. Minerva will continue to be acting Head until you're formally discharged," Albus said, but there was hesitation in his voice like he was holding back something. Tom's suspicion only grew and he sat up, even more alert. He set his porridge to the side and glowered at the man.

“What do you want, Albus?” Tom barked.

Albus hummed and leaned back in his seat. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

Tom didn’t say anything. Instead, he looked at Albus with a look that said *Of course.*

Tom had been a foolish child, though much less of a fool than others. He was arrogant and proud, even before he'd had his growth spurt. He'd always been a beautiful child, but he hadn't always been so tall. Tom had been one of the shortest in his year until his fifth year when he grew about a foot over the summer. It had been endlessly painful. But, Tom had met Albus in his fourth year, only fourteen, and spouting shit at older Slytherins like he was a much bigger man, and there was only so much magic that Tom could get away with before it got physical.

Tom had gotten a snapped arm for his troubles.

Bellatrix had gone mad and had insisted that he go to St. Mungo's, citing the old matron at Hogwarts as a batty woman unfit to even bear a wand. They—they being Rodolphus, Bellatrix, Tom, and Slughorn—had arrived at E&T. Tom hadn't cried once, because he hadn't cried since he was the little boy from the orphanage. He had sat there and a man—only two decades younger than the one before him—had walked up to him and offered a fucking *lemon* drop.

And then he proceeded to Heal his arm.

“You asked me how I broke my arm,” Tom said quietly. “I told you that I got it from a pureblood that I said wasn’t shit. He still isn’t, by the way.”

“Yes, I do remember that,” Albus said with an amused smile. “I also remember you proclaiming that I was mad and that you were special. You said that you were going to be the best Healer St. Mungo’s would ever see. I knew from the moment that you said it that it was true.”

Tom rolled his eyes.

“Really, Albus. What is with all of the *sentiment*?” Tom sneered, disdain dripping from his tongue.

Albus’ smile widened.

“I’m not the only with an overwhelming amount of sentiment. The Vol de Mort project,” Albus said. “Harry made me realize. Why you did it all. Gellert died over 15 years ago. You were only 18 years old, my boy. You were just a *boy*. It wasn’t your fault.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed and he looked away, unable to look at the man.

“I see him. Everywhere,” Tom said, forcing the words from behind his clenched teeth. “Every time, I go into that theatre, his *ghost* haunts me. Your *eyes* haunt me. Do you know what it’s like? You have done...so much for me. And he died.”

Slowly, Tom looked back at him, and he slowly pulled away when he saw the overwhelming amount of pride brimming in Albus' eyes. The man dabbed at his eyes as if mopping up unshed tears, and he was smiling so wide that Tom thought his face might crack in half.

“Tom,” Albus declared. “I’m stepping down.”

Tom blinked. “Are you?” he asked, tone as bland as possible.

“Yes. I am an old man, with few years left. I’d like to spend those years doing what I enjoy—teaching the next generation of Healers,” Albus decided, a bright gleam in his eyes at the very thought. “And I’d like *you* to be the new Head Healer of this hospital.”

Tom was silent for a long moment.

“I wouldn’t be Head of Spell Damage anymore,” Tom said quietly, looking at the man with a frown.

“No. Minerva is quite good at the job. I thought to ask you what you thought about her remaining in the position now that you will be assuming a new one,” Albus said. “Your promotion would be enacted the moment that you’re reinstated.”

Tom cleared his throat. “I accept,” he said.

Albus clapped his hands in excitement, beaming at the man. “Very good! We’ll make the announcement as soon as you decide.”

“Snape will be seething,” Tom said with a smirk. Albus tried to hide his amusement, but he only looked at Tom fondly despite the stern expression on his face.

“Now, Tom—” Albus cut himself off. “I believe that there are a few people outside that have been *eager* to see you.”

Suddenly, Tom knew what meant. He stiffened and reached for his porridge again to give himself something to do. Albus was staring at him with that endlessly fond look that made Tom want to curse something or *someone*, preferably the old man.

“What?” he bit out.

“Family is important,” Albus said quietly. “Forgiveness is hard, but it only makes you an even better man than I had hoped to make you.”

“I’m not your son,” Tom said softly. There was no heat to his words. Albus laughed quietly.

"I will see you tomorrow, Tom," Albus said with a wink and he walked to the door just as it was flung open. He nodded at the trio that stood in the doorway. "Hello, Healers."

“Head Healer,” Rodolphus said, inclining his head. Bellatrix tugged him into the room without a look back, her gaze caught on Tom’s face. Tom hesitated as he looked at his two best friends.

Their hands were linked and they were both staring at him like they hadn’t ever seen him before.

“What?” Tom barked.

"He wouldn't let us see you. He said you wouldn't like it if we saw you when you first woke up," Bellatrix said quietly.

Tom frowned. “What did I look like?” Tom barked.

“Greasy,” Harry smirked, falling into his normal seat, legs spread haphazardly. Tom admired the line of his trousers for just a moment before he turned back to Bellatrix and Rodolphus. They were watching him like they were waiting for their dismissal.

“Sit down. I don’t like the hovering,” Tom snapped, waving his wand with his free hand.

Rodolphus and Bellatrix settled in the Conjured chairs, awkward and nervous.

“We watched your heart transplant,” Bellatrix blurted out. She looked at Tom like he was going to disappear. “I was terrified.”

“Okay,” Tom said quietly, waiting for Bellatrix to continue.

“You’re an idiot. You turned your back, didn’t you?” Bellatrix whispered. “To protect...*him*.”

Harry didn’t flinch away from her words, but his eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth to protest.

“Yes,” Tom confirmed. Harry jerked back, startled. “Of course, I did.”

“You love him,” Bellatrix said. “And he loves you. Good. You deserve to be loved.”

Tom’s nose wrinkled.

“Enough with the sentiment, Bella.”

Bellatrix’s lips pulled back into a sharp smile. “Does that mean that you forgive me?”

Tom pursed his lips as if he were thinking about it. "I suppose."

Bellatrix threw her head back and cackled. She still hadn’t let go of Rodolphus’ hand.

“And me?” Rodolphus asked.

Tom hummed. “Well, I can’t very well just have *her* around. The crazy bitch wouldn’t have it.”

Rodolphus barked out a laugh. “Hey, that’s my Bella, you’re talking about.”

Tom scoffed, loudly.

“So, you’re together. You’re a...thing,” Tom said, his nose wrinkling and his lips curling around the words disdainfully. Rodolphus snorted, looking down at his and Bella’s joined hands and then back up at Tom’s childish expression.

“I think the words you’re looking for are ‘romantically involved’, because that’s what *grown-ups* are. Not all of us deign to date post-pubescent children,” Rodolphus said.

Harry scoffed. “Oi. I’m eighteen.”

“Thank you for proving my point, you fetus,” Rodolphus retorted. Harry leaned forward, eyes narrowed at the challenge, and Tom straightened in his bed, intrigued by the direction of this encounter.

“This fetus is already more accomplished than you. How many papers do *you* have published?” Harry demanded.

Rodolphus shrugged. “None. But, you aren’t published either.”

“Yet! I just did a heart transplant on your best friend. Have some respect,” Harry said, sticking out his tongue and only proving how young he was. It just made Tom love him more, somehow. Merlin, he was turning into a sap. How utterly unforgivable.

“You’re both children,” Bellatrix said, her voice flat. She looked back over at Tom, her eyes turning softer and harder, all at once. “Never do that again. Turning your back on an enemy? *Never*. Do you understand me?”

“You’re not my mot—”

“Never. Again.”

Tom scoffed but didn't say anything. Harry leaned forward in awe.

“You’re like his *Hermione*,” Harry breathed, looking over at Bellatrix. He still was wary of her—Tom could tell from the way he was angled slightly away from—but he seemed a little more relaxed. More understanding.

Bellatrix had never really presented herself as human to Harry. She'd been a Valkyrie from the moment they'd met, and that was always something that Tom appreciated about her, but it was jarring to others. He wasn't surprised that Harry would probably never take to her, especially when one of the first things Bella had done was try to make Harry's life absolutely miserable. He doubted that they'd ever like one another, but he didn't particularly care.

“I’m Head Healer, now. By the way,” Tom said calmly as he finished up his porridge.

There was a long moment of silence and he looked up from his bowl at the three dumbfounded expressions. A slow smirk worked it was across his face.

“You’re fucking joking,” Rodolphus whispered.

“Is that why Dumbledore was in here?” Bellatrix shrieked, forever the harpy.

Finally, Tom turned to Harry. Harry was staring at him wide-eyed, a small smile on his face.

“Are you serious?” Harry whispered. He reached forward, grabbing Tom’s hand in his. “Why now? You’re, like, bedridden.”

“I think it *might* have something to do with us revolutionizing the Healing world, but I could be wrong,” Tom said, sarcastically.

Harry let out a tiny scoff, his grin growing wider. He leaned forward, punching Tom lightly in the shoulder.

“Don’t be an arse,” he said quietly.

Tom laughed, slow and deep. He lifted their joined hands to his lips, brushing a kiss across Harry’s knuckles. Those hands had pulled him together. Those hands had killed and Healed and touched the very core of him. Those hands, those beautiful, beautiful hands, and this beautiful, beautiful person that belonged to him*himHim,* and no one else. Never again.

“It was a beautiful day to conquer death, sweetheart.”

Harry laughed, nodding. “Yeah, it was.”

Chapter End Notes

Only an epilogue left. See you in the next few days.

SOURCES:

Hearteater Virus: themonsterblogofmonsters

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THREE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

A single breath.

Hold it steady. Hold it together. *Keep it together*. *You were made for this*.

She took a step out from the Apparition Zone and looked around, nervously as she fixed her saddlebag over her shoulder, keeping her notes close to her side. Keeping her head down, she avoided the stares of everyone else as they looked at her with pride in their eyes, as if she were *their* daughter. She pulled to a stop in the corridor that she had walked through so many times and looked at the door to the trainee room.

She had trained for two years, completing the first intensive pre-training programme to be a Healer. She had fought to prove herself, to prove that she wasn't just a product of her family's legacy. She had fought to prove that her trauma wouldn't break her and that she was better than what they thought of her.

Closing her eyes, she thought of the words her brother had whispered to her, just last night.

You were made for this.

Lavender Brown-Potter took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

The room didn’t stop for her, and so she continued walking forward. There was a short queue leading up to a Healer that stood with a list, directing the trainees to their lockers. Lavender looked around and saw at least seven other women besides her, dressed in hunter green instead of white matron robes. At least *some* progress was being made.

“Last name?” a bored Zacharias Smith asked when she reached the front of the queue.

“Brown-Potter.”

Smith looked up, sharply from the clipboard. Lavender stared back at him, solemnly. Slowly, she tucked a short copper curl behind her ear, exposing the tiny silvery pit of her cheek. Smith’s gaze softened ever so much and he nodded.

“Welcome back, Trainee Brown-Potter. You’re right over there between Branstone and Cauldwell,” Smith said. Lavender nodded her thanks and she walked forward towards her locker, her limp so very slight that it almost didn’t exist at all.

“Hey, I’m Eleanor. Eleanor Branstone,” the tall brunette girl said. She was of stocky build, but she had a kind face and large hands. She held her hand out and Lavender took it, shaking it once.

“Lavender,” she said. If Eleanor recognized her, she didn’t say anything.

Cauldwell turned as he finished doing up the hunter green trainee robes. He opened his arms, showing off to the pair of them.

“How do I look, Ellie?” Cauldwell asked with a grin.

“Like a trainee,” Eleanor said, flatly. She looked over at Lavender. “Oliver, this is Lavender. Lavender, Oliver Cauldwell.”

“Nice to meet ya,” Oliver said with a cheerful smile, leaning forward. He looked over Lavender, slow and purposeful, his eyes catching the silver scars that went down her face and neck and disappeared under her neckline. Lavender snorted and pulled her turtleneck over her head, revealing her stomach and even more of her silver scars. “Holy shit.”

"I'm attached, sorry," Lavender said as he reached into her locker and pulled out her hunter green robes. Having them in her hands suddenly made everything seem more real, and her lips curled into an impish smile. She felt giddy like she had been when she was still an incoming first year at Hogwarts.

“Are you sure?” Oliver asked, mournfully.

“Yeah. I’ve been dating my girlfriend since I was 16. We just celebrated our three year anniversary,” Lavender said pointedly. Her smile widened as she thought of Ginny. She pulled on her robes over her body and looked over at Oliver and Eleanor. “Are you ready?”

"Uh, definitely not," Oliver chirped. He seemed to have gotten over Lavender's rejection, quickly. "I'm terrified. Never thought I'd end up here. I thought I was going to be a writer for the Daily Prophet. Now, I'm here."

“That’s a bit of a leap, isn’t it?” Lavender asked primly. “Did you do a training programme?”

“We did a one year programme in Munich. A few months after we got out of Hogwarts. You?" Eleanor asked.

Lavender hesitated. “I did the two-year programme. With Lily Evans.”

“*Merlin*,” Oliver said, impressed. “I hear she’s insane.”

“She is. Isn’t she, *Lavender*?”

Lavender grimaced as she turned at the familiar voice. The newly formed trio looked over at the young woman leaning back against the lockers opposite them. She looked different from how she had back at Hogwarts—less perfect. She'd look different during their programme, too, but now, this was the fully-evolved version of Romilda Vane. Her nose was slightly crooked and her face wasn't so smooth, pockmarked and far too angular to be called truly

beautiful. Her long hair had been shorn close on the sides, though the top was still long and she had a septum piercing. She looked so, so different, but her voice was still very much the same.

“Yeah, she is,” Lavender said sharply. “Hello, Romilda.”

Romilda nodded. “If you dipshits are ready, the Head Healer is becoming impatient, apparently.”

She turned and flounced away, her long braid snaking down her back. Oliver opened his mouth, already enamored with Romilda, but Eleanor was staring after her, narrow-eyed.

“I’ve heard about the Head Healer. I hear that he’s mad. And *intense*,” Eleanor said quietly as they followed the sea of trainees out the door, being herded down the hall like a bunch of first-years. Lavender looked around as they were led down the stairs to the theatre floor.

“I’ve heard the same,” Oliver said, adding his two Knuts. “But, he’s also a genius. And apparently, all of the matrons have a crush on him. I wish I could be that suave. I’d get any girl I wanted. But, yeah, super scary.”

“He’s really not that bad,” Lavender said with a smile.

She looked around and swallowed hard as she saw the familiar pair running past her. Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange stalked down the hall, barking at one another, their plague doctor masks hanging around their necks. They were speaking in quick murmurs, a scathing look on Bellatrix’s face and an endlessly fond look on Rodolphus’. They didn’t even seem to notice her as they walked past.

“How would you know?” Oliver challenged.

Lavender hesitated. “I—”

“Out of the way! Out of the way!” a familiarly high-voice cried out.

Lavender turned and watched as Luna Lovegood ran past, clicking forward in her impossibly tall heels, a matching towering hat atop her head. Astoria Greengrass and Hannah Abbott flanked her on either side. Astoria winked at her as she walked past and slowed down as she passed Romilda, who was leading the pack with Smith. Astoria reached over, brushing a stray hair from Romilda’s face before she powered down the hall, catching up with Hannah and Luna.

“How does she know her?” Eleanor asked, wide-eyed. “Who *was* that?”

Romilda smirked over her shoulder. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Lavender rolled her eyes. “That was Astoria Greengrass. She works in the Children’s Ward.”

“Badass,” Eleanor breathed under her breath.

Oliver whined impatiently. “But, the Head Healer—what if he’s scary?”

“He’s *not*.”

“But, how do you know?” Oliver asked.

They were slowing down, coming up on a theatre that was overly familiar to Lavender. She lifted her chin as they entered and the crowd spread around as they looked at the man that stood in the very center of the room, a strange grimace on his face.

“Because he’s practically my brother-in-law.”

Oliver and Eleanor gaped and Lavender grinned as she looked around the theatre. Everything looked the same.

“Your brother-in-law? Wait...are you…” Eleanor asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Oliver was staring up at the gallery. “Who are *they*?”

Lavender turned and followed his finger.

The quartet stood in the gallery, watching over the new trainee class like benevolent gods. It should’ve been hard to look intimidating in lime green robes, but they all made it work with the impassive expressions on their faces.

“That’s Mediwizard Ronald Weasley. He studied under the Lestranges and he works *exclusively* with hitwizards,” Lavender said, nodding at the tall redheaded man. *Won-Won*, she used to call him, before Ginny thought it was bit weird that Lavender liked to flirt with-cum-tease her older brother. Lavender turned to the man standing at the other end. He was still stocky, but his face had become more angular. He looked both younger and older than his twenty-one years. “That’s Healer Neville Longbottom. He’s working with Greengrass to create a sexual education curriculum at Hogwarts.”

Eleanor’s eyes widened, impressed. “And those two?”

“*That* is Hermione Granger. The woman who saved my life,” Lavender said, pointing at the short dark-skinned woman. Her curls were pulled back in a large ponytail and she was turned to the last Healer, laughing softly at something he’d said. “Unicorn hair? That was her and her teacher, Emmeline Vance.”

“And him?” Oliver asked, something like reverence entering his voice, like he already knew.

Lavender rolled her eyes. “That’s Harry Potter. My big brother.”

“He’s here. Be quiet,” a short girl with silvery blonde hair hissed, her eyes narrowed. She had a thick accent; it sounded vaguely French, but different from Malfoy’s.

Slowly, they turned from the gallery and looked at the man of the hour: Tom Marvolo Riddle had arrived and he was now standing before the new trainee class, his hands behind his back. He looked particularly intimidating, his dark robes stretched across his broad shoulders, his burgundy eyes nearly blazing crimson. He didn’t need to speak to grab everyone’s attention. He had already had it from the moment he’d stepped into the room.

“Each of you comes here today hopeful, wanting in on the game,” Head Healer Tom Riddle began. “A month again you were in school—whether Hogwarts or Beauxbatons, or even a pre-trainee programme—being taught to be witches and wizards. Today is the *true* start of your training to be Healers. The year you spend here as a Healer trainee will be the best and worst of your life. You will be pushed to the breaking point. Look around you. Say hello to your competition.”

Lavender’s eyes widened and she looked around at everyone around her. Romilda Vane was leaning forward, practically salivating at the very idea. The tiny blonde French girl was vibrating with excitement. Lavender recognized a few others briefly—Lucian Bole, Kenneth Towler, and a former Ravenclaw that Lavender recognized by sight but not by name. They were all glaring at one another, taking Tom’s words a little too seriously. The others looked non-English and that was to be expected. St. Mungo’s took the best and the brightest from all over now.

"Eight of you will switch to an easier specialty—whether that means joining the bureaucracy at the Ministry, the government of your home country, or venturing into business practices. Five of you will crack under the pressure. Two of you will be asked to leave. This is your starting line. This is your arena. How well you play, that's up to you."

Tom lifted his chin, his eyes grazing over them, an air of *unimpressed* surrounding him. His gaze lingered on Lavender for just a moment too long, his unimpressed air growing. He had been one of the many that had been skeptical about Lavender’s interest in the Evans-Potter legacy.

Lavender grinned back at him, letting her wolf show.

Game on.

DIAGNOSIS

They were nearing the last people remaining. With each shout, Lavender’s hopes dwindled when she saw who would most probably make up her team. Eleanor and Oliver, she was fine with. They seemed like good people. It was the other two that set Lavender on edge: Lucian Bole and Romilda Vane. Romilda looked bored, laying on her back over an entire bench, her long legs straddling the plank of wood. Oliver was pretending not to stare at her.

She really did look different from when they were in school. Lavender had known she’d been sick a few years ago, but she’d never known with what until Lavender had learned about mod potions and addiction in Lily’s programme. Romilda Vane was no longer gorgeous as she had been at Hogwarts, but she *was* incredibly sexy.

There was a sort of magnetism about her, and she seemed to embrace that even more wholeheartedly than her beauty.

“So…” Oliver began. “Looks like it’s us.”

“Looks like it,” Romilda drawled. She barely moved.

Lavender hummed, leaning back against her cupboard, bored

“So, you’re the inbred one.”

Lavender turned at the snarky voice, eyes narrowing in irritation. Lucian Bole had been in her year, and though she’d never had problems with him, she’d heard *all* about him, much like she had heard about Romilda. He was the epitome of the snob, playing his role so very well with a terrible sneer and a quick scoff at everything. He’d been privately tutored for two years, too good for Lily’s programme, apparently.

“‘Inbred’?” Eleanor asked, her nose wrinkling in confusion.

"She's Lavender Brown-Potter. Lily Evans' daughter. Harry Potter's little sister. The newest addition to the Evans-Potter legacy, hmm?" Bole asked, circling her as if that were supposed to intimidate her. Lavender sniffed and stared over at him, with narrowed eyes.

“Yeah, I expect so,” Lavender retorted.

“Lily Evans,” Eleanor murmured, unable to contain her awe. “And Harry Potter. What are *they* like?”

"Insane," Romilda said. Finally, she sat up, hands pressed to her knees. "They have to be to come up with the type of shit they have."

Oliver leaned forward, curious. “What do you mean by that?”

“Harry Potter and Tom Riddle came up with the Frankenstein Method,” Romilda drawled, unimpressed by Oliver’s lack of knowledge. “Maybe you didn’t talk about it in your mediocre programme, but Potter’s part of an elite class of trainees, and he’s just one of the leading minds of this hospital.”

Oliver's eyes widened. He was too easily impressed, in Lavender's opinion. "The Frankenstein Method? The one with the—"

“The heart transplant,” Bole finished smoothly. He was still watching Lavender was narrowed eyes, sizing her up. Lavender carefully turned her attention away.

“And Granger came up with unicorn hair,” Eleanor finished. She regarded Lavender uncertainly. “Unicorn hair leaves silver scars, doesn’t it?”

Lavender grinned at the girl’s fishing. “Yeah, it does. Werewolf attack. It’s why I want to work with her.”

“I would’ve thought Spell Damage,” Bole muttered.

“Not all of us are looking for glamour. There’s a lot of work to be done in Creature-Induced Injuries,” Lavender snapped. She lifted her chin. “But, I imagine *you’re* Spell Damage. And you too, Vane.”

“You’re right,” Bole agreed.

Romilda smirked. “You’re wrong,” she sighed, dramatic as ever. “I had a rather brilliant Mind Healer when I was younger. I’ll be one too, I expect.”

Lavender raised an eyebrow. Perhaps, *that’s* how she knew Astoria. She didn’t know the older woman very well, but she *did* know that she was married to Draco Malfoy. Vane and Malfoy would suit one another—both haughty and self-important, but talented. Lavender knew that much about Vane—for someone that used to be so obsessed with the outside versus the inside, she was rather adept at the Mind Arts. At least, that was the rumor.

“We’re the last ones,” Eleanor noticed as the squeaky small blonde girl—Delacour, apparently—left the room with her own group of trainees, led by the Healer Hannah Abbott. “Who do you think our teacher will be?”

Just as she asked, the door flew open again and the five trainees jumped, all turning to face the Healer that would guide them through the first six months on the job.

“Bole, Branstone, Brown-Potter, Cauldwell, and Vane,” a voice cried out. “You’re with me.”

Lavender looked at her new teacher, leaning forward with bright eyes. Hermione Granger’s eyes lingered on her face, softening ever so slightly before she drew back into herself, arms crossed over her chest. She looked sterner, as clinical as Harry had ever described her, though that wasn’t a side that Lavender knew.

“I have five rules. Memorize them,” Hermione barked. “Rule 1: No need to flatter me. I already hold little regard for you. That, likely, won’t change.” She waved her wand, Conjuring up four booklets. They each took the booklet from her, thumbing through the pages hungrily. “Trauma protocol. Matrons will ‘Summon’ you. You’ll know when your wand emits bright sparks. Level of emergence will be dictated by color. That will be in your book. You answer every ‘Summon’ at a run. A *run*, that’s rule 2.”

Hermione turned on her heel and was walking, her eyes trained on the roll of parchment in her hands. Lavender trailed behind with Eleanor while Oliver and Lucian Bole fought to lead the pack. Eleanor was staring at Hermione with stars in her eyes, already idolizing their new teacher.

“She’s so *cool,”* Eleanor breathed.

Lavender snorted and gave a nod. “Yeah, total badass.”

"Your first shift starts now and lasts 36 hours," Hermione declared. She wasn't looking at any of them, still staring at her list of patients for the day. Bole looked enthralled. "You're trainees, the bottom of the healer food chain. Essentially, nobodies. You will run diagnostic

charms, brew potions, staff and stock the pharmacy, work every second until you drop. You won't complain."

Hermione twisted through the busy corridor, head held high.

“Healer Granger,” called one Healer, a Desi witch with lovely raven hair.

“Healer Patil,” Hermione greeted in return. She turned into an open door and threw her arm out, presenting a long row of beds, all separated by curtains. They were all made perfectly, each sheet crisp and unslept in, as far as Lavender could tell. “On call rooms. Full Healers will most likely occupy them. My best advice is to sleep when you are able, *where* you are able. But, not with your superiors. It’s been proven that *that* never leads to anything good. This leads me to rule three: if I'm sleeping, don't wake me unless your patient is dying. Rule four: The dying patient better not be dead when I arrive. Not only would you have killed someone, but you would also have woken me for no reason. Are we clear?"

There was a long beat of silence.

“Uh, you said...there were five rules?” Oliver pointed out.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. “Rule number five: When I move, *you* move.”

They waited for a long moment, staring at Hermione, as she stood there. She paused to glance at her wand, and frowned when there were no sparks to be found.

“Is something…supposed to be happening, Healer Granger?” Lavender asked, attempting to hide her shit-eating grin. Hermione’s eyes narrowed. Lavender had the same smile she had when she’d challenged the older woman for Won-Won’s affection.

“Ugh. *You’re* doing my write-ups,” Hermione barked.

“For what?” Lavender squawked.

“Don’t talk back. I have a recently un-dismembered magizoologist waiting on us.”

DIAGNOSIS

“Have you seen them?” Neville asked as he fell into his seat, reaching across to steal a forkful of Hannah’s food. Hannah brought up her fork to parry away Neville’s fork, and laughed at the hurt look on his face.

“You have the exact same food as me, right there,” she protested. “Eat some of Astoria’s, if you’re so hungry.”

“No. Do not eat my food,” Astoria grumbled as she poured of her notes. “Yes, I have seen them. They look stupid.”

“They aren’t stupid. They’re babies,” Hermione said, offering her two cents. She slid down into the seat next to Hannah, hip-checking her to make room for both herself and Ron. Hannah huffed, but slid down the bench gracefully. “I have Lavender.”

“Oooh, *another* Potter,” Draco said mockingly as he fell into the seat next to Astoria.

“I’ve got your girl too, Malfoy. I suspect that she’s hoping to be *your* student six months from now,” Hermione said. She laughed at the pleased look on Draco’s face that he tried to wrestle under control.

"Have they called Lavender ‘inbred' yet?" Ron asked. He greedily spooned beans into his mouth. Even after so many years of being with Hermione, he had only *marginally* improved his table manners. It was hard to fight the home-training of six other siblings fighting for the best bits of dinner.

“Of course they have,” Hermione said with a smirk. “You thought they were going to let Lavender get away with not acknowledging her last name?”

“She is adopted,” Hannah pointed out. She hummed. “Some of my students have noticed. I have a girl, Gabrielle Delacour. Reminds me of you, actually, Hermione.”

“How so?”

“A kiss-arse?” Draco asked innocently.

Hermione's eyes narrowed into a death glare. Draco leaned into Astoria's side as if she would defend him, but she shoved him playfully, sliding her notes over to Neville.

“You think we can get this approved?” Astoria asked.

Neville only had to look at for a half-second before he snorted. “I think you underestimate how conservative your father-in-law and the rest of the Board of Governors are.”

“Do not call that *man* my father-in-law,” Astoria said with her wrinkled nose. Draco laughed into her shoulder, shaking his head.

“He *is,”* Draco pointed out. “No matter how awful he is.”

“You could have taken *my* name,” Astoria pointed out. “My parents are amazing.”

Ron rolled his eyes and looked back over his shoulder. He barked out a laugh when he caught sight of the trainees attempting to spy on them. Lavender winced when she saw him laughing at them and then she let it roll off her back, and winked at him. Ron let out another loud round of laughter. Hermione scoffed.

“She’s going to taunt me about you,” Hermione murmured.

“She’s dating my sister. She’s practically my sister-in-law, the way they’re going,” Ron pointed out. Hermione hummed, shaking her head. “No, really. I’ve never known Ginny to

be...well-behaved. Lavender has straightened her out so much that Mum's been sending her a Christmas sweater since they got together."

"It took me a whole *year* before I got a sweater," Hermione said in astonishment.

"Perhaps, it's because you're a psychotic hag?" Ron asked politely.

Hermione's look of outrage softened into a small smile. "It's been a while since you've called me that," she murmured, affectionately.

"Thought it was time to pull that out," Ron laughed into her hair. He peeked over at Astoria and Neville's shared notes. His ears flushed a bright red as he caught sight of the boldest titles. "Anal? You're really trying to teach Hogwarts students about anal?"

"It is not only about having safer sex. It is about having *pleasurable* sex," Astoria declared, probably louder than she needed to be. Neville's cheeks turned pink for only a second before he pushed his near-automatic embarrassment to the side.

"She isn't wrong," Neville pointed out. "Were *you* having good sex as a teenager?"

"Oh, absolutely not," Hermione muttered. "Never forget McLaggen."

"Who?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That housewarming party we threw. You don't remember it? McGonagall caught Riddle and Harry out in the garden."

"She *what*?" Ron shouted, his eyes practically bugging out from his head.

"So, I'm not the only one," Astoria breathed in relief.

Everyone at the table paused and looked over at the frazzled young woman.

"What do you *mean* you caught them?" Draco breathed. He sounded delighted by the very fact. "Astoria, *mon amour*, you walked in on them and you did not tell me, your husband of nearly a year?"

"Don't pretend we haven't heard them either," Neville pointed out. "Remember when we found out about them being a thing? Harry is…loud."

"No, I am still on *Astoria* catching them," Draco said dismissively. He was staring at his wife, and Astoria rolled her eyes at her husband's dramatics.

"During that fundraiser. The one he went to Blaise. They slept together."

"This is *brilliant*. Next time he tries to have the moral high ground over me, I am going to lord this—" Draco practically cackled.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "You will *not*. See what Riddle does to you if you try."

“I’m not afraid of him,” Draco lied unconvincingly.

Hermione frowned as she looked around for her person. She tried to search for even a glimpse of him, but she couldn’t find him. Not even the little baby trainee stalkers seemed to be able to see him, and if anyone besides Hermione could find him in the crowded cafeteria, it would be Lavender.

Hermione frowned. “Where *is* Harry?”

DIAGNOSIS

“They all look young. Were we ever that young?” Rodolphus asked.

“We certainly never looked so stupid,” Tom drawled as he sat back in his office chair. He looked around. Even after three and a half years, he wasn’t quite so used to occupying what had been Albus’ office from the moment that he’d stepped into St. Mungo’s.

“At least, I never looked so stupid,” Bellatrix added.

Tom hummed. “Well, maybe you did.”

Bellatrix gave him the finger and Tom smirked back at her, raising a challenging eyebrow.

“You’re a fucking—”

“Carefully, *Trixie,* I’m your *boss* now.”

"You've been using that shit against me for three and a half years. I'm not going anywhere. You *need* me," Bellatrix said loftily, giving him the most cold-blooded stare she could muster, which truly was more of a hot-blooded stare due to her lunatic temper.

“Do I? Do I really?” Tom mocked. “Because, I do think we could use a little more leeway in the budget and Weasley is doing remarkably—”

“Don’t commit that blasphemy, Tom. Just don’t,” Rodolphus said, endlessly amused.

“And don’t call me, Trixie. What do I look like? A dog?” Bellatrix snarled.

“Well, you are a bitch of a bi—”

“Tom,” Rodolphus warned with an easy smile.

Tom snorted. “It was too easy anyway,” Tom drawled, arrogant until the very end. He sipped his tea snobbishly, just to get a rise out of Bellatrix. She gnashed her teeth at him. “They’re children. That’s why they look so young.”

“Are we back to that?” Bellatrix asked, bored already.

“Are you calling us old?” Rodolphus challenged.

Tom smirked. “Never.”

“Some of them are older than Harry freaking Potter was, when you met him,” Bellatrix said slyly, staring at Tom with black eyes. “*Interesting.*”

“I will have Nagini eat you,” Tom promised. Bellatrix gave a delighted laugh. “Harry was old beyond his years.”

“He was damaged and young and found you hot,” Rodolphus corrected. “And before you go waxing on about how a lot of people found you hot? Well...you found him hot too.”

“Yes, well. We’re both very attractive people,” Tom said smoothly.

“You’re alright,” Bellatrix sighed as she fell back across the couch, her head finding its pillow on Rodolphus’ sprawled thighs.

“I seem to remember you being in love with me,” Tom hummed.

Bellatrix gave him the finger.

“Speaking of your *lover*, where is he? Harry freaking Potter,” Bellatrix drawled.

“An internal procedure that he stole from me. An Auror suffered an Entrail-Expelling Curse. It was rather vicious,” Tom said, irritation bleeding across his face. Bellatrix smirked, like she was pleased with Harry, which was a shock. Bellatrix, even still, always found something wrong with what Harry was doing on any particular day.

“So, *that’s* why you aren’t fucking his brains out and are instead speaking to us,” Rodolphus hummed. He sipped his tea, eyes bright with his amusement as he waited for Tom to speak out against his words.

“No, that’s true. You both wouldn’t be here if he was,” Tom admitted.

Bellatrix squawked. “You’re supposed to be the Head Healer. Set a good example.”

“I do. I put the fear of Merlin and God into everyone in this hospital.”

“Except Harry.”

“No, I put my cock in *him*,” Tom smirked. He always felt free to be crass in front of his two closest friends, and they both laughed instead of admonishing him for being so open about ‘his sex life’. Harry was on some strange kick about being more private because they’d nearly been caught last week. Tom didn’t really see the problem.

He was the Head Healer. He could do as he pleased.

“You didn’t assign him a team?” Rodolphus asked.

“And have him have less time for me?” Tom asked. “No. He also didn’t want one. Not this year. Not with Lavender being here.”

“Oh, I saw the littlest Potter. Do you think she has what it takes?” Bellatrix asked.

“Maybe.” Tom didn’t expand on that.

“Speaking of Potters...are you ever going to...you know, settle down? With Harry?” Rodolphus asked.

Bellatrix sat up abruptly at the question, her eyes widening. “Absolutely not.”

Rodolphus turned to his wife. “Why not?”

“We don’t need...*that* in the family,” Bellatrix sneered. “Harry Potter, ugh.”

“Bellatrix, it’s okay. You can admit you sometimes enjoy his company,” Rodolphus said placatingly.

Tom leaned back in his chair to enjoy the shouting match that ensued about the merits of Harry Potter being married to him. Bellatrix put on a good show of disdain, her lips curled into a sneer to fight against the laughter that bubbled in the back of her throat. Rodolphus continued on, calm as ever, listing the positives even as Bellatrix shouted down each one with a variation of ‘He’s the worst’.

Tom kept silent about the gorgeous handcrafted diamond-inlay platinum ring settled in a little velvet box in the bottom drawer of his desk.

DIAGNOSIS

“Should we not be finding our teachers?” Gabrielle Delacour asked in her snotty French accent, worry contorting her pretty face. Lavender scowled to herself; how had Gabrielle Delacour attached herself like a burr to their little group already?

They were already at too many with five of them. They really didn’t need a sixth ranger in the midst.

“Nah. It’s still technically lunch and I’ve never seen an internal procedure. Lavender said there’s one happening here,” Oliver insisted. Lavender nodded in agreement and she stopped in front of the gallery door, pushing it open. She mimed a sign for silence and they crept into the empty gallery and stared down through the glass.

Lavender had always known logically that her brother was an excellent Healer. She’d known that even before the Frankenstein Method. She had even read the paper that he and Riddle

had co-written about the historic internal procedure. Lavender had heard stories about him from Hermione, Ron, Neville, and even Draco. But, seeing it in person—*for real*—when she understood what was happening in front of her.

He was *brilliant*.

"That's...that's your brother?" Eleanor whispered softly.

Even Gabrielle was silent for *once*.

"Whoa...what is he *doing*?" Bole breathed as he pressed up against the glass, staring down at Lavender's brother in awe.

Harry was elbows deep in a man's abdomen, pulling and pressing out the slippery mess of viscera and organs. He was talking animatedly to Matron Strout who looked undisturbed by the sheer amount of blood that soaked her white robes. The trainees couldn't hear their conversation above the Queen that was blasting through the magical theatre.

"What is he *listening* to?" Oliver asked.

"I don't know what he's doing, but he's listening to Queen. A Muggle band. Our mum is Muggleborn," Lavender reminded them. They all made humming sounds as Harry pulled out his wand from the tray, getting it slick with another man's blood and waving his wand. Lavender recognized the Untangling Spell, and her eyes widened as she watched the expelled organs twist about properly, and then slowly slip into the bowls that were waiting to the side.

"He's pulling out his internal organs? Should he be doing that?" Oliver asked.

Bole scoffed. "It's Harry Potter. He can do as he *pleases*. He's one of the leading Spell Damage specialists in the world. *You're* the idiot who doesn't know who he is," Bole said pointedly.

Oliver's face flushed. "I'm not an *idiot*," he insisted.

Bole rolled his eyes.

"So, Spell Damage specialist, huh?" Lavender asked as conversationally as possible.

Bole nodded. "Yeah, and I want *him* to teach me."

Gabrielle leaned forward, rocked out of her stunned stare. "Oh, I want to be taught by Astoria —"

"Nobody asked you, Delacour," Romilda said, bored.

Gabrielle looked properly offended but she curled into herself, crossing her skinny little arms over her chest. Lavender turned her attention back to her brother.

"Was he always this good?" Eleanor asked. "How do you get that good?"

“He was made to be Healer, wasn’t he? Merlin!” Oliver said, adding his two cents.

“Do you think he’s better in theory or practice?” Romilda drawled.

Bole rocked forward. “He was taught by Riddle, right?”

It took Lavender a moment to realize that all of those questions were addressed to her. She felt a sense of irritation creeping over her and her leg gave a twinge. She would hate herself if she needed to grab her cane only halfway through the day—not even halfway through her shift—, but the stress was getting to her overtaxed muscles.

“I—” Lavender began.

“He’s waving,” Gabrielle said in wonder.

Lavender looked down and her lips twitched when she saw Harry looking up at her. He *beamed* at her, waving his blood-sticky wand until Fleetwood Mac drowned through the theatre. Lavender grinned back at him and waved, sticking out her tongue like it was only the two of them. Harry laughed—not that she could hear through the glass—and stuck his tongue out back at her.

“Whoa. You’re really siblings,” Oliver breathed.

“Did you think they weren’t?” Romilda asked with a roll of her eyes.

Before their little group could devolve into another argument, the gallery door flew open.

The trainees were dumbstruck as *the* Head Healer waltzed into the gallery and walked right up to the glass. He rapped on it loud and sharp, the sound cutting through the screeching guitar solo. Harry looked up and smiled. He winked at Riddle as he pulled out the small intestine rather viciously. Riddle rolled his eyes and rapped once on the glass and then pointed his wand to it.

“Stop showing off for the children,” Riddle commanded.

Lavender squawked in disagreement and Gabrielle elbowed her hard in the side and hushed her. Riddle turned one lazily amused burgundy eye onto them before turning back to look down at Harry.

“I’m not showing off. I’m *teaching*,” Harry said with a bright smile.

“You’re showing off, and you’re not doing particularly well. You’re sloppy.”

Harry’s smile dropped away and he growled, irritated. “What the fuck do you mean I’m sloppy, you fucking dick?”

Lavender’s jaw dropped open.

“Can he talk to him like that?” Gabrielle whispered, outraged by the very idea of someone talking back to Head Healer Riddle.

“It’s his *boyfriend*,” Eleanor whispered.

“But, he’s still the Head Healer,” Gabrielle muttered back.

“We can hear you.”

The trainees jumped and looked back at Riddle. He was watching them with a slow smirk. Lavender watched both Gabrielle and Eleanor flush under the power of Riddle’s attractiveness. Lavender could only roll her eyes. Harry *had* bagged a really hot guy—insanely hot if Lavender was being honest, *Merlin*—, but the man was more than a bit of an arse.

“I’m teaching, Tom. Get the fuck out of my gallery,” Harry barked. He waved his wand, lowering the radio so he didn’t have to keep shouting, presumably. Wait, no, Lavender realized he was going to keep shouting. “Answer my question! How am I sloppy?”

“You’re using the Untangling Spell?” Riddle asked. “You should do it by hand.”

"He's, like, forty. A perfectly healthy forty-year-old man in peak physical shape because he's an *Auror*. I can use magic on his bowels,” Harry snapped impatiently.

“But, *should* you? After all, you’re *teaching*,” Riddle said with a shitty grin.

Harry huffed and looked over at Matron Strout with an eye-roll. "Can you believe him?" he drawled. "The man hasn't been in a theatre in three months and he's going to tell me how to conduct my own internal procedure."

Matron Strout’s lips twitched but she was careful not to smile.

“I taught *you*,” Riddle pointed out.

“Maybe not well enough if I’m sloppy,” Harry scoffed.

“Well there’s only so much that I can correct before it becomes a difference in pure talent,” Riddle said loftily.

Lavender’s lips twitched at Bole’s sharp inhale—it seemed like insulting Bole’s hero was personal to him. Lavender rolled her eyes. She swore she’d never tell Harry. He’d get a big head about it.

Harry put down his wand and gave the man two middle fingers. Gabrielle hissed at the disrespect.

“Get the fuck out of my gallery, Riddle,” Harry snapped.

“I’m the Head Healer. I go where I please.”

“You’ve been using that excuse for *three and a half years*,” Harry groaned, shaking his head. “Ugh, did you need something?”

"Come to my office when you're done. I want to discuss the budget with you."

“No. I’m mad. You gave the Goosemoor Grant to *Astoria* and *Neville*. Over *me*.”

“Their idea was better,” Riddle sighed like it was something they’d gone over before.

“They want to teach Hogwarts teenagers how to do anal!”

“A worthy cause if it prevents anal fissures. Really, Harry,” Riddle said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just come to my office when you’re done.”

“Very well, *Head Healer*,” Harry drawled.

Lavender’s nose wrinkled. They were flirting now. Maybe they’d been flirting the entire time and she hadn’t noticed it. Riddle stepped away from the glass, waving his wand and he regarded the trainees with a raised eyebrow.

“Shouldn’t you be...operating or something?”

“It’s...it’s our first day. Sir,” Eleanor squeaked.

“Hmm. *He* was in the theatre his first day,” Riddle pointed out. They all looked back at Harry. He was watching them warily, but seemed ready to get back to work. “Well, there *is* only one on Harry Potter. Carry on. Hello, Lavender.”

Oliver squeaked at the notion that Riddle knew her name.

“Healer Riddle,” Lavender sighed with a nod. “Still think I won’t make it?”

“Well, it hasn’t even been 12 hours yet. You’ve still got time to prove me right,” Riddle said. The only sign of amusement was his glinting burgundy eyes.

“You’ll be wrong,” Lavender sang. “And you’ll owe my brother ten Galleons.”

Riddle snorted and continued as if he hadn’t heard her, staring forward.

“Wait...so they’re, like, really together?” Romilda asked. “I always thought that was a rumor.”

“Nope,” Lavender scoffed. “Harry really fucked his boss and now they’re disgustingly in love. They’re a bad romantic dramedy."

Oliver frowned. “What’s a romantic dramedy?"

DIAGNOSIS

“Well, you’ve been expecting me?” Harry drawled as he leaned on the doorframe. He raised an eyebrow at Tom. The man smirked back at him, sitting behind his big, impressive desk, his legs spread to accommodate his big, impressive dick. “How can I help you, Head Healer?”

“Hmmm, I still like when you call me that,” Tom hummed.

Harry smirked. “Oh, I know,” he laughed as he shut the door behind him and he leaned back against it. “I saved that Auror.”

“Say it again. You’re making me hard.”

Harry nearly cackled at the deadpanned response. He flitted across the room until he slid right on top of Tom’s desk, sliding aside all of his important papers, settling right in front of the man. Tom looked up at him, leaning back in his chair, looking he ruled the world. Harry leaned back on his hands and arched his back, staring down at him haughtily.

“I *may* have utilized your suggestion,” Harry admitted. “Maybe.”

“You may be in the theatre more, but I still *am* Tom Riddle,” Tom said like it explained it all.

It really did.

“Lavender, huh? Did you give her shit again?” Harry asked, some disapproval on his face. He laughed when Tom straightened and tried to look innocent. “Oh, don’t think I didn’t notice you trying to make me less angry after last night.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Tom asked primly.

“You asked for a second helping of eggs. I may be able to grill a chicken breast now, but I still *definitely* can’t make eggs. And you ate them,” Harry accused.

“I eat your eggs every morning,” Tom retorted.

“But, not because they’re *good*. It’s because you’re a sentimental sap,” Harry cackled.

Tom scoffed. “No, I am not. I can assure that it’s only because you refuse to make anything else because *you’re* the one seeping sentiment everywhere,” Tom said. He paused, thinking over his words and then he pointed at Harry. “Don’t do it.”

“Don’t do what? You just...the joke is *there*, Tom.”

“Don’t be a child, Harry.”

Harry smirked. “I’ll show you a child,” he said slyly as he slipped down from his perch on Tom’s desk and settled on his lap, tossing his arms over the man’s shoulder.

“Well, hello there.”

Harry pressed his lips to the man's ear, slowly rolling his hips, his rounded arse pressed right up against the half-hard bulge that was already twitching against Harry. Harry leaned into the heat of Tom's chest and hummed hard enough that the vibration would travel the curve of the man's ear and down his spine.

"Hello. Do you want to know what I want to do to you?"

One of Tom's hands snaked around Harry's waist, pressing against the small of his back and pulling him tighter against him. Harry gasped as he felt his own cock, already ready to go, press against Tom's hard abdomen.

"No, I'd like to," Tom said as politely as he could even as he placed his wand to the side and knotted his fingers in Harry's unruly hair. He pulled hard enough that Harry had to swallow his moan. Harry's neck arched and Tom bit down roughly right over his Adam's apple.

"I...oh, *fuck*," he hissed as he rocked down against as Tom's hot tongue dragged up to his pulse point and sucked a dark purple bruise there. "I'm...gonna...ride you so fucking *hard*. I'll...make you...believe in *God.*"

"I'll make you believe I *am* God," Tom retorted in a whisper.

Harry let out a long laugh. He groaned when Tom thrust up once, interrupting his bout of amusement.

"Not everything's a competition, Tom," Harry whispered. Even still, he leaned up on his knees and Tom's hand slid under his robes to press against the hot skin of his waist through his thin shirt. Harry reached down and palmed the man's cock through his trousers. The older man's cock was already hard for him.

"Do you still find me *that* hot?" Harry drawled.

Tom stared up at him with a sincerity Harry didn't expect from him, not outside of the safety of their bed. It was in the rawness that Tom kissed his skin with, the delicateness that he breathed against Harry's skin with.

"I will always find you beautiful, even at your worst. I found you beautiful in your rudeness, your bitterness. I find you beautiful in your ambition and your rage. I found you beautiful in your brattiness when you lost the Gorsemoor Grant. There is nothing you could ever do that would make me think you weren't," Tom confessed.

"What if I killed someone?" Harry shot back, like that wasn't a terrible, horrifying thing; as if he still didn't sometimes have nightmares about Katie Bell accusing him of clipping her wings.

"I will always find you beautiful, even covered in someone else's blood," Tom said easily.

Harry raised an impressed eyebrow. "You're fucked up."

Tom barked out a laugh. "You're fucked up."

Harry grinned. “Let’s be fucked up together.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear Readers,

It has been a long time coming, hasn’t it?

This little story that I started in November which I SWORE wouldn’t be very long (80,000 words max) has grown into a monstrous beast of a fic, that I am so, so proud of. I’ve had a lot of ups and downs, but I’ve had your loyalty for the entire way, and I’m so glad for that.

Now, this isn’t the end of Healer Harry and Healer Tom. I think that I’ve got a short little fic or two to wring out of them, and I’m open to ideas, if you’d like to give them to me! I want to explore Harry and Tom’s first date after getting back together. I want to write about them moving in together. I want to write about Draco and his relationship with his father. I want to write about Ron meeting Hermione’s parents for the first time. I want to write about Neville being a complete badass. I want to write about Lavender’s first procedure, and possibly, even the rest of the trainees. I want to write about Lavender moving into Grimmauld Place while the old trainees move on with their lives. I want to write about the five times that Harry tried to ask Tom to marry him and the one time Tom got there first. There’s so much I want to explore, but I want YOUR ideas too.

I want to thank a few really awesome people: EssayofThoughts for being super encouraging and allowing me to use her work for some of the most interesting medical cases. My Tomarry discord server for being supportive and cheering me on through my writer’s block and my slogging around. And finally, all of YOU, my loyal readers. Your comments make my day every time I read them, and even though I don’t respond to them all of the time—due more to my anxiety, than anything—I grin and share them with my roommate anyway.

Welp. It's been a long crazy ride of almost a year. I hope you enjoyed Diagnosis. See you on the flip side!

End Notes

This is going to be a side project, most of the time, until The Fairest Saga is finished, but this will be here, and it WILL be fun.

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by parasythe (paradisetrain)

Book Covers by didbuckygetaplum

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!